AN INDIAN CITIZEN'S GUIDE ON HOW TO AVOID

A NATION OF IDIOTS

INSPIRED BY TRUE STORIES

DAKSH TYAGI

An Indian citizen’s guide on how to avoid

A NATION OF IDIOTS

by

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Visit the official website at www.anationofidiots.co

Author's note: Although real situations and people have inspired most of these stories, the names and details have been changed to protect the guilty and innocent alike. Also, creative freedom has been exercised – because a book isn't life.

Credits: This has been a team effort. In other words, the blame for this book lies with several people. For editorial mistakes, blame Bhavyati Parikh. For cover concept, blame Nidhi Kamdar. For cover design blame Jigsaw Brand Consultants. And for the words, blame me.

To my lawyer. There you go.

CAUTION:

If you don’t know how to look for idiots, they are hard to spot. But idiots are everywhere. Across the table, in the next compartment, on the next seat. At railway stations, airports, restaurants and shopping malls. They stand among your friends, drink your beer and laugh at your jokes. They might even be a part of your family, you never know. Look closer, and you just might find one inside your home. An idiot might be in your bedroom, even if you are alone. Imagine that.

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HOW TO DEFUSE AN IDIOT

Money never made anybody rich.
To be rich, you need the poor.

The rich understand this quite well.
But the poor do not.

And this idiocy, they call an economy.

ONE

On how to out-think an idiot

AN INTRODUCTION

WHERE WAS I?

On 11 September 2001, I was in my ninth-standard physics class, when one of my classmates rocked up 20 minutes late and said that he was delayed by the attack on America.

On 8 November 2016, my wife and I had just made it back to Sydney, after selling off our broken-down car for scrap, when I heard about the demonetisation of Indian currency.

I compare the two, for the initial hysteria surrounding the news. Which one hit harder? Depends on whom you ask. One was an out-of-the-blue attack. Destroyed lives. Left us awestruck. And the other was 9/11.

On 8 November 2016, while the Prime Minister announced the demonetisation of 86 per cent of the country's currency, my wife and I were 500 kilometres from Sydney, stuck in the middle of nowhere. Our car, our prized second-hand Peugeot 307, had powered down and died. What followed was a night of tow trucks, clueless mechanics, booked out hotels, dead phones and a mugging attempt – most of which we survived. And nine hours later, somehow, we made it home. Never happier to see our door.

We could not wait to share this nightmare with our families. But first we needed sleep. So, we put our phones to charge and our heads to bed, when a volley of messages began shuttling through. Some confused, others furious, most of them overwhelmed by the announcement. And with each message, I found our eventful night reducing to a blip.

A single declaration had left a majority of the country's currency invalid and its billion citizens spooked. And though, through this move the

government intended mainly to curb the flow of black money, there was just one problem.

In India, money as cash is usually black.

Black is the money that changes hands but leaves no proof. Never makes the entry of a ledger or the inside of a bank. Commonly hoarded in stacks of similar notes and bound in rubber bands, black money also carries the spit from a million prior hurried hands. Everyone has it, yet no one is willing to own up that they do. This makes black money like an ego, but worse.

So, if cash is usually black and everyone deals in cash, the question was more complicated than simply learning about how to visit your local bank branch within the next two months and exchange your old notes. The question also included the part – how do you explain your deposit to the taxman? This made the whole announcement wildly exciting.

On 8 November 2016, what you had lying at home was just paper. Unless you could get it into a bank.

This was a nationwide audit.

All of us had to learn the rules of this exchange. Individuals, companies, political organisations, godmen, and even members of organised crime. Bank tellers required to execute this plan were finding this out at the same time as the general population. Citizens were going through their cupboards, families were counting their savings, and business tycoons and movie stars, I imagine, were rushing to their dungeons.

Meanwhile, in my dungeon of an apartment, as I took in the news, the messages, the articles and the videos, I wondered if I had found my way out. I must clarify, in the time it took me to put together this book, for the most part, I was without a first chapter. Without an introduction.

This book that you have bought, borrowed or burgled is about an idea. The idea that there is, within our country, a collective of heads that influences our lives for the worse. A group that forces on us *their* logic, *their* reasons and *their* way of life. It confuses us, and expects of us, to follow blindly. This collective I call *a nation of idiots*.

A nation of idiots is like any other nation within our country; a nation of thinkers, speakers, farmers, preachers, travellers, drivers, riders, walkers,

kneelers, writers, traders, teachers, doctors, dopers, painters, miners, leaders; but it is not easily visible. You can't spot a nation of idiots, not in the way you can spot a group of doctors or lawyers, unless you can notice its effect. And as I have learnt through my adventures in idiocy, until you look, you can be in it, move in and out of it and yet be unaware that it exists.

So, for me the question was this: How do I introduce my readers to this nation? How do I find a suitable situation? How do I begin?

And then, this curveball came hurling.

A billion people forced to exchange their currency notes against their wishes. And though, at the time, I didn't know how I might go about it, I knew, this was my first chapter. It had to be. A thing as simple as changing old notes for new.

"This is it," I told my wife. "I have to leave for India."

"Why? What do you have to change?" she asked.

"Mindsets," I said.

"That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard," she said. "Go back to sleep, please."

An emotional argument followed. While she argued, I got quite emotional. First, came reason. In a single night, we had lost a car, the meat of our savings in trying to get home and all our sleep. Buying a ticket to Mumbai would lead to a demonetisation crisis of our own. Then, reason led to the abandonment of it. We spoke at the same time and over each other. She put her questions to the bathroom basin and I replied to the television. And finally, we resorted to props. She chose a toothbrush, something with which she could point. I picked a pillow. And while you can't strictly point with a pillow, it is quite a versatile argument prop. It won't break when you throw it on the ground, it won't alert your neighbours when you do your head-in and scream. And you can, following a hurtful comment, hug it.

We followed this with an hour of silence. We were still speaking, but only to the air around us. And then, without giving a reason, she agreed.

I imagine, it must have been the years she watched me labour over this book, or the thought that this crisis might help me deliver. Or, it must have been my mere mention of how a month without me might do her good. Bottom line, she said yes, and I knew better than to ask for a reason. I stuffed my bags and shot out of the house. Within the hour, I was on the train to the airport, where they gave me the Christmas discount on the ticket. One ticket for the price of three. And as luck might have it, the attendant was a woman of Indian origin.

“Bank queues start from overseas, don’t they?” she said, with a smile and a smirk.

“Not why I’m heading there,” I said.

“Says everybody,” she said.

“Except, I mean it.”

“Don’t you have something to change?”

I said, with a proud grin, “Only mindsets, I suppose.”

“All I have is a middle seat,” she said.

“It’ll do.”

On the flight, I found my seat between a couple who had booked the window and aisle seats in the hope that no one would book their middle. But then, they were unwilling to swap. So, for the rest of the flight, I joined them in an intense game of passing their parcels. And while I was hoping for the music to stop, I began jotting down events as they unfolded. I figured if I did this for the entire trip, these events might show me the way. At the time, I was unsure how these events might help, but they do make for an interesting read. Here are some of the highlights following the demonetisation announcement on 8 November 2016 at 8 pm:

- Until 2 am the same night, in just six hours, jewellers sell a total of 15 tonnes of gold, worth about ₹ 5000 crores. People lose their sleep and their minds.

- The following day, BSE, SENSEX and NIFTY fall 6 per cent. People with money are the first to run. Unsurprising, as always.

- Gold prices shoot up by 40 to 60 per cent. Ask and you shall receive.

- Numerous dummy companies exposed:

• In first position – a company with over 2,134 bank accounts.

• In second – a 900 account company.

• A close third – 600 accounts under one name.

• Consolation to the government – no owners found. I wonder why.

- A leader from the opposition shows us that he is a part of the mob. Like the common man, he stands in line to exchange his four thousand rupees. He brings along the press, cheerleaders, balloons and all. And he walks out with four thousand rupees in new notes. He does this, *once*. It is all the cash he has on him. Lord! Help us swallow this pill. He must be part of the mob.

- Guardians of certain religious institutions begin laundering money. Sure, why keep God out of it? Income tax food chain flowchart goes: Layman < Taxman < Deadman < Godman. In an exposé, a news channel catches a Mathura priest willing to convert ₹ 50 lakhs of black money for a 20 per cent commission. Again, the agents of God fail to impress.

- Among the top searched terms for November 2016 was, “how to convert black money into white”. The income tax department could have carried out raids just based on IP addresses. Talk about a missed opportunity.

- The other widely searched term was more concise: “how to convert black into white?” Unfortunately, this only brought up results for fairness creams. And bleach.

- During the same month, searches for “Sunny Leone” see no drop. Unrelated, but important.

- Over a hundred people died due to the demonetisation crisis. Causes: standing in long ATM-lines; unable to pay medical bills; and suicides from broken marriages, after the groom’s side demands new currency notes in dowry.

Meanwhile, prime-time debates on the news played like an out-of-tune marching band. We got the answer to the question, “how many experts can a television screen fit?” From their tiny news windows, they bickered and barked at each other, but they said nothing. The only thing their viewers got was the comfort of knowing, in all the noise, that they were not alone. No one seemed to have a clue.

I had travelled 10,150 kilometres in 13 hours, at 781 kilometres per hour. Then, an hour at immigration, at an inch a minute. During this time, something significant had occurred. A minister had accused the government of covering up a leak with a rushed announcement. This sent news-bees into an absolute frenzy. Who knew, what and when, became the national war cry.

Wherever you went, demonetisation was the topic of the hour. Lunches, dinners, cafes, shopping malls, even showers. Conspiracy theories were alight. Burning through neighbourhoods and exploding in business circles. And as a result of these theories, folks were detonating in public. Noteworthy rumours were:

- New ₹ 2000 notes contain a trackable nanochip.

- ₹ 50 and ₹ 100 notes to be demonetised in January 2017.

- Pink ₹ 2000 notes are losing color.

That last one is proof that given the right situation, people will buy almost anything, except the truth. I mean, how can pink notes possibly lose colour? Aren’t they mostly laundered with white *kurtas*? I got out into the city, unsure of what to look for, but convinced I wasn’t looking to debate policy. I believe, like all major decisions, time will explain this best. Besides, I am more interested in people and behaviour. And wandering, I find, makes for excellent research. You get answers to questions you never think to ask:

- Neighbourhood stores are remarkably comfortable without customers.

- Cinemas do run films without an audience.

- Unskilled laborers can be made to stand in bank queues, if needed.

- Gaps in queues are the work of body odour.

Journalists were abuzz around banks and ATM lines, pushing their mics to eager mouths. Since they hardly ever look in the right direction, I thought it best to stay away. I took the bus to the train station and the train towards Delhi. I got off at Mathura, and from there I continued on wheels and foot. Through towns and villages. The same fire of panic. Some confused but optimistic. Some, just plain confused. Surprisingly, none were just optimistic.

Still without a clue and a cause, I reached Delhi to a standing ovation. They were facing ATMs, which I found annoying. I checked into a hotel, where the receptionist offered a list of vendors who were still accepting old notes. And she also advised that since doctors must accept old notes, it would be wise to get my routine check-ups right away.

“You never know,” she said, crossing her fingers.

The following morning, I walked out to a Delhi morning, unsure of where to begin. Also, the city was a blur. Like spectacles on steam. But when in Delhi, never mention how hot the weather is, or how cold, foggy or wet. Because no matter how bad it is, you will always hear the same reply, “This is nothing. You should have been here last year.”

To them I usually say, “Let’s meet next year.”

But for all the criticism about the Delhi smog, I find that it was excellent at providing privacy in public spaces. And it was while I sat on a park bench, getting high on the early morning smog, that an elderly gentleman joined me. At least, I thought he did. He said a casual hello and straightened out the newspaper he had brought along.

“Let’s have a look, shall we? What are they up to today?” he said.

It took me a moment. But then, I had my way out. “Thank you, sir,” I said, “you have been most helpful.” And with a three-finger wave, I walked away, a man with a plan.

I knew what I had to do. Amid the panic and pain, the cover-up theories and the comments, I decided to keep my eyes on the moves of the government. And, my answer came from three separate cases.

1. The man who went too far

As a narrow-framed child, I hated overnight train journeys. I feared that while using the toilet, I would slip on the commode and fall down its large hole. The thought of exposing my rear to a hole staring down fast-moving jagged stones gave me nightmares. As a grown up, I worry about being stuck with the wrong company.

Karim sat two feet away from me but spoke with the pitch of a motivational speaker. He worked for a ceramics trader in Moradabad. Twice a month, Karim took the same train from Delhi to Mumbai. He carried samples, struck deals with buyers and made most of his money in commissions, in cash. When Karim got the news, he was in his hotel room. In his room safe were fifty thousand rupees. And, a lot more at home.

So, the following morning, Karim left early for the railway station. He purchased twelve tickets for his usual route. Six months' worth of tickets, paid for, in cash. Then, he boarded the train back home. And while everyone around him appeared hassled, Karim felt genius-like for having found a way out. But he wondered, could he do more? Could he go further?

Once he got home, he recruited his wife, his brother and two of his over-dramatic childhood friends, who were willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. But interestingly, unwilling to stop him from going to the ends of the earth. Together, they purchased tickets under different names, some even under fictional ones. The plan was to get a refund once the 'crisis' was over.

"Old black becomes the new black," he said.

"Did it?" I asked.

"Well, I told my brother-in-law about it," Karim took his head back. "When he showed up at the station, there was a long queue," he said. "Almost like I found a hole. And now, everyone's in on it. Someone from the government must have noticed the spike in railway bookings. They capped cash sales at ten thousand. And to get refunds you must present your tax card."

“Tough luck,” I said.

“Most of my money’s gone,” he said and sighed. “Before this, I was looking to quit. The travel is exhausting. Feel like a camel living off hotel food. Don’t get to see my kids. It’s …” He trailed off. Then, came back. “Now, I have to stay. What else am I to do on these trains twice a month?”

2. The back-door entrepreneur

Sumit believes he is an ideas man. But, by descent, he's a trader. And while he worked under the eclipsing shadow of his father, Sumit was searching for an idea, which would make him a self-made man. Since he couldn't inseminate his own eggs and squeeze out of his own vagina, the only other way to become a self-made man was through work.

A day after the announcement, he went to a bank in his hometown of Meerut. A line of seventy-odd stretched onto the road. But Sumit knew the bank manager. He made his way inside the bank, through a door in the back. The bank had a back door, or what I assumed was also known among robbers as *The Exit*.

To exchange his stack of cash, it took Sumit 10 minutes, five of which he spent discussing the motive behind the government's announcement. When he returned home for dinner, his father scolded him for leaving the shop early. Sumit argued with him as he retreated to his room. His father's grumpiness frustrated him. He wanted a way out but found sleep an easy exit. But then, in the middle of the night, he sat up. Lit up. In the crisis, he spotted an opportunity. And to his family, friends and business contacts, Sumit sent the following carefully worded message:

'*Back door. If need change old note, 20 off. Rest get back new note*.'

Decoded, it read: 'I can exchange old notes for a 20 per cent commission'. By the next morning, Sumit had 74 requests. In a matter of hours, the word had spread. From second-degree business contacts to third-degree family members, Sumit had become a man in high demand.

He asked, no, he demanded his clients bring the cash to a recently purchased family apartment. There, they counted the money. Wrote names in code. Made promises. By evening, 20 per cent added up to more money than what Sumit had made in 10 years.

At dinner, Sumit ignored his father's sighs of disappointment. Instead, he spoke to his mother about the kind of sarees she liked. Maybe, he will gift her one, he said. To which, his father let out a grunt.

To this day, I can imagine Sumit laughing all the way to the bank. Walking on clouds, he was strutting around. He got to the bank, to the door in the back. A notice on the door – “No access to the floor.” It was sealed shut, bolted and all. He tugged and he pulled, his smile going hollow. He went to the front to the guard with a gun. They know, said the guard, about the door in the back and the crook in the bank, they changed them both, like the notes in your hand.

With a frown and a sulk, Sumit joined the line of a hundred or more. His plan was shot to bits, his dream was torn. But he wasn’t going to back down. He was a fighter, a trooper, in damage control mode. I’ll change the notes and rejoin the line. For 60 days, I’ll put in the time. There’s still life in this scheme, he had figured it out. Until he stepped up to the entrance. Only to realise, those walking out had a mark on their nails. A big black blot of indelible ink. Entry allowed only once in a day, said the guard, no more.

Sumit returned home. For an hour he scrubbed, but the mark wouldn’t budge. It faded a bit, but two months of this and he’d lose a finger for sure. His father shouted at him from across the door. With no options left, he sent the following message:

‘Take back old note. No change. No back door.’

The next day, while Sumit returned the money to particularly abusive and aggressive clients, all he worried about was missing yet another day of work.

3. The black and gold kitchen slab

Among the millions of people who bought gold from black money, there was the story of Amar, a public servant. But this was not just a story about black money, but, *black-er* money. If untaxed income is black, *black-er* is the untaxed bribe. And this story was about how Amar lost more than half his ill-gotten gains in three quick and easy steps:

Step 1:

After the announcement, Amar removed the old notes he hid under his kitchen slab and bought gold from a vendor he trusted. Since the demand for gold was high, the price was at 60 per cent over market value. Amar didn't mind. His wife loved gold. He loved her. It added up. He returned home and placed the bar under the kitchen slab.

Step 2:

A few days later, a rumour surfaced that the government planned to limit the amount of gold a person can possess. Amar's wife already had too much gold. She was already possessed.

Step 3:

Since no one was willing to buy back black gold, Amar was forced to sell it at 30 per cent below market value.

In the riddle of how a man stumbles, there are always marks for the method:

The market value of 10gms of gold.	= ₹ 30,600
After the demonetisation announcement, black market value of gold goes up by 60% of market value.	= (60 % of ₹ 30,600) + ₹ 30,600
Amar's purchase price	= ₹ 18,360 + ₹ 30,600

	= ₹ 48,960 per 10gms
After the gold limit announcement, black market value of gold goes down by 30% of market value.	= ₹ 30,600 – (30 % of ₹ 30,600)
Amar’s sale price	= ₹ 30,600 – ₹ 9180
	= ₹ 21,420 per 10gms
Difference per 10gms of gold:	= ₹ 48,960 – ₹ 21,420
On 10gms, Amar’s loss	= ₹ 27,540
The amount of black-er money under Amar’s kitchen slab.	= ₹ 30,00,000
Amar’s actual purchase	= 61.2745 gms of gold
Amar’s actual sale price	= ₹ 13,12,500
On ₹ 30,00,000: Amar’s actual loss	= ₹ 30,00,000 – ₹ 13,12,500
	= ₹ 16,87,500

***

The Delhi airport always appears under threat. Mainly, from passengers looking to “invade” planes. But this ‘mission’ to get to their seats before anybody else is derailed – by the urge to overpack and argue with staff at

baggage counters. While I waited at the boarding gate, I decided to call my wife. To do this, I must first give up my privacy for 15 minutes of ‘free’ internet. She greeted me with an instruction. “Listen,” she said and informed me that she had shortlisted second-hand cars that were within our budget. From me, she expected that I choose a car that will at least outlast its annual registration this time. This task, however, required the two skills I lacked: the ability to decide and the capacity to take the blame. But without an argument, I agreed. And this prompted an inquiry.

Have I found what I was looking for?

I replied by telling her that the queue to board the plane stretched all the way to the bookshop. There had been no boarding announcement yet. But all it took for a hundred passengers to line up was for a man to get up from his seat and stand before the counter.

“Standard practice, don’t you think?” she said.

“I suppose it is,” I said, “and maybe that is why they are looking for queues where there should be none.”

Apart from a salesman who could not quit his job because he bulk-bought his commute, or the trader who failed to break from his father’s shadow, or even the civil servant who lost half his kitchen slab in a week, one thing became clear. While we were obsessing over who knew, what and when, and how to get rid of those old notes, the government focused on one simple thing.

They were trying to out-think those who followed blindly. To find queues where there should be none.

When Karim bought tickets for future travel, or when Sumit exchanged his notes by skipping a line, no one checked them. Not until they went further and exploited the opportunity. Their initial actions were the same as when you sneak through a second carry-on bag by giving it to a family member who reunites with you after check-in. You proceed, thinking you got away with it. Well, there are on average, four thousand cameras at most airports. You got away with nothing. It is just that, this is not what they were after. But try setting up a booth for handbags of other passengers and they will come after you. For then, there is a queue forming.

None of this matters of course, since as my wife pointed out, I hadn't answered her question. Had I found what I came for?

I took a moment to gather my thoughts. While I had arrived looking to find how a seemingly invisible nation which popped up out of nowhere and swayed us in the wrong direction, I did not know where to start. And while I was following the moves of the government, and while the government was looking for queues that should not exist, and while citizens wondered from where the authorities might strike next, a nation of idiots was emerging.

It started with the rich, I have no doubt, as it almost always does.

Following the announcement, the rich were only rich subject to how much of their untaxed income they could put through the banks unnoticed. And so, began a campaign to stay rich.

And to stay rich, you need the poor.

So initially, they opened accounts for their employees and they deposited money. But they held onto the bank cards. They backdated invoices, forged salaries and made money hop through a dozen accounts, only to boomerang into theirs.

But there was a lot more money to churn and hardly any time left. So began the rumours, the news that spread fear. Fear that created panic. And the panic that gave the money-rich the perfect opportunity to clear their dungeons.

Soon, nothing was too ridiculous. Nothing too far-fetched: floating bags of cash into the Ganges, laundering money through religious institutions, and in a posh Noida colony, burning bags of cash.

And as it always does, ways of the rich became infectious. We saw the rich and the influential trying to get away with it. So, we thought, so should we. We hid away our second handbag because we believed someone was coming after it. And we stashed in our cupboards the ₹ 500 or ₹ 1000 note that would have helped a homeless person survive. And, right there – we stepped into a nation of idiots.

We didn't stop to look that while hundreds died during the demonetisation period, thousands would die later from the cold winter. These were people we didn't help – the man who slept on the street; the

child that went hungry for four days. Us, the same people who brazenly bragged about the ingenious ways we exchanged our notes, we did nothing for the ones in need. We walked out with new notes, the same old idiots.

And this is the real menace of a nation of idiots; it builds its member count at an alarming rate. It does not exist until it comes to life. And then, in no time, it has millions enlisted. And it is the reason, during the demonetisation months, we failed as a country.

For it is because of a nation of idiots, and because we acted like them, that the demonetisation period will always be remembered as the demon-i-sation of us.

It’s okay to be annoyed by people.
I’m sure you’re annoying to others too.

TWO

The making of an ideal

INDIAN MAN

It appears two things define an ideal Indian man: his hatred of Pakistan and his desire to be the first. Wherever he is going, he wants to get there first. He will tailgate an ambulance. He will sprint across a busy highway. He will unbuckle that seat belt at 700 kilometres per hour. He will queue up pelvis to pelvis. He will power walk through an airport. He just so badly wants to be the first he is willing to embarrass himself for it. And he wants the same rules to apply to his bride. He must be her first.

But the journey to becoming an ideal Indian man is far more complicated than one might imagine. You don't just grow up, no sir! You are brought up, in the right manner. With the right manners. And the right mannerisms. We aim to find quality in absurd quantities. So, what are these right qualities we want in an Indian man?

Quality 1: Conformity

Before my tenth birthday, I was born five times. The first time, I imagine I woke up in the hands of a doctor, hanging upside down. Routine for most, special to some. I was born a second time when a pundit named me. He brought out a gem from his mythical bag and tagged me with a name that would make a loud sound if it fell on the ground. You couldn't get through the name without taking a breath. Then, I was born and branded a third time while my parents were filling out my kindergarten application. They wanted a better way to address their second child. And so, they looked around the room and asked my sister for a name. She was four years older than me and had recently learnt to spell. And she came up with what I describe as a type of an epic rat. And that became the next three years of my life.

But when it was time to send me to a boarding school, I had to take birth a fourth time. Even my parents knew they couldn't leave me in a hostel full

of kids with my sister's brainchild. So, my father called his brother-in-law, who named me Rishabh.

Better! I thought. Perhaps with Rishabh, I might shine.

And I set off to boarding, with a tolerable hoarding. And for a while, I was not reborn, until a day before our term holidays. My science teacher, who was pregnant and out of ideas for baby names, asked each of us to take turns and explain the meaning of our labels. On my turn, I said I didn't know what my name meant. I had never thought to ask. She found this amusing.

"How can you go through life without meaning?" she said.

Luckily, for the class, she had a book of baby names in her purse. She went through the Rs and she stopped at Rishabh. It took her a moment.

"Rishabh," she said. " … A bull."

I got home, furious. "You named me a bull?" I told my parents. "They're all laughing at me."

I demanded to be born again – something short, and with proper meaning. Eventually, my parents agreed. They took a month and then, they offered me the name, Daksh.

"Daksh, my name is Daksh Tyagi. Hi, my name is … " I introduced myself to a mirror in my room and the name seemed to suit. And after the summer holidays, I returned to school re-branded and with renewed confidence. During assembly, our headmaster announced that a boy named Rishabh from the third grade would be known henceforth as Daksh. The class queues – heads, blazers, shoulders – shivered. Chuckling. Teachers failing to hide their smirks. It wasn't quite the start I had in mind. I thought they might see me as brave for changing my name. Instead, for the next few months, I was braving through seniors referring to me as Hence Forth.

It had been the tactical equivalent of shooting yourself in the foot to blow your cover and then hopping around the battlefield to stay alive. My science teacher, still pregnant and now resembling a Florence flask, allowed me to explain my new name. I told her and the class that Daksh meant to strive for perfection.

My answer was greeted by thirty pairs of silent lips and a smile on one: mine.

“Isn’t it also the name of a king?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered, reigning over the silence. “Parvati’s father.”

“Lord Shiva’s father-in-law, right?” she said.

And there it was. The silence shattered in a second. And collective laughter began the year of my life, where kids called me father-in-law. And eventually, Fil.

Point being, I had four, fresh foul starts. And for the scars they left on me, I still remember the meanings of the names of all the kids in my class. We were each given a name and a meaning to that name. Each one of us meant to be unique. But, as I discovered over the next few years, that though we put a lot of thought and effort into the label we carry through life, the meaning of other things we were supposed to do and follow did not seem to matter much.

It started, as it always did, with God. Our headmaster told us to pray before bedtime. God listened after nine, he told us. It made no sense. It was always after nine somewhere in the world. A globe had taught me. I asked him if the smartest man in the world believed in God.

“He did not,” said my headmaster, “and now he is dead. So, close your eyes and start praying.”

The other big instruction was to hate Pakistan. Among the set of things, I was to love cricket, drink my glass of milk and hate Pakistan. Sleep at nine, be kind but hate Pakistan. Do good, don’t fight, unless with Pakistan. All are equal, love everyone, except homosexuals. And Pakistan.

And then, from the logic which made my head hurt, it went south, to feet. Feet, I began to realise, had a towering spot in our daily lives. We had a deep obsession with feet. Not a fetish exactly, but more so a craving.

Growing up, if you had one kid in the neighbourhood who was around your age and built, he was your friend for life. For me, this was Tanmay. Our families were neighbourly enough, which helped. His family followed the thought that anything that grew underground was not good to eat. As he

explained it, it had germs and bacteria. But apart from that, we were living through our school holidays in an almost synchronized manner. We co-ordinated our meals, nap time, homework, only so we could be free to play cricket at the same time.

One Sunday afternoon, a preacher of their faith was to visit his house. There was a euphoric excitement about it all. The house decked out for what seemed to be the birthday party of the century. There were balloons and confetti, and soft drinks by the jug. They called him a godman, which meant that God spoke through him. I found this confusing. If we were supposed to talk to God through him, then why had I been praying to a nightlight all these years?

And as Tanmay and I stood at the door, a man in laundered bright whites entered with a crack team of followers. Seven men devoted to clearing the way. The godman took the centre spot on the couch. The others sat on the ground, which I found confusing because from what I had seen in my short life, people made the help sit on the ground. Where will the help sit now? I wondered.

For some reason, godmen always have great hair. Their followers, on the other hand, had lost theirs to stress. Soon, the gathering started to warm up. The hosts brought out a container, placed it under the godman's feet and Tanmay's father began to wash his feet. Others joined in, each with one scrub, before handing over the towel to the next person in the queue.

"How dirty are those feet?" I said.

Tanmay said in a baritone, "It is not his feet, but our crimes we wash." And then he turned to me, "That's what they told me."

What does that mean? Am I in a room full of murderers? I wondered.

And then, things took a turn for the weird. The family poured the preacher's *feet water* into silver-coated glasses. They offered a glass to each person in the hall. And with a possessed enthusiasm, they drank the dirty *feet water*.

"I think you meant, it is our crimes we swallow," I said to Tanmay, only to find his father standing before me. He pushed a silver glass towards my

face. And when I denied with a stiff nod and a shiver, those bushy eyebrows furrowed.

“This is holy water,” he said.

I did not open my mouth to reply, perhaps fearing that he might throw the *feet water* in my face and some of it might accidentally make it into my system. I was already at the door, so I grabbed my slippers and ran out of the house. I assume those eyebrows were watching me flee, but I did not look back.

Later that evening, Tanmay came to my house to play cricket. He said his father was quite upset with me.

“It wasn’t so bad,” he said. “Others didn’t seem to mind it.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“Zipped up my jacket and poured it down my shirt,” he said. “But I think you should speak to my father. He wants to know why you ran away … ”

“I didn’t know what to say, that is the whole reason I ran,” I said.

“ … Otherwise, he won’t let me come and play.”

The smallest things can shatter a kid’s world. If Tanmay couldn’t come over to my house to play, then what was the point of life?

“Okay,” I said, handing him the ball. “But only if you manage to beat me.”

Two hours later, after an epic ass-kicking, I sat at Tanmay’s dining table. With biscuits and milk. I asked Tanmay if the glass of milk was the same glass used for *feet water*. He told me the ‘feet glasses’ had been retired to the prayer room and his family would never use them again. I saw sense in that decision, if any.

When Tanmay’s father walked into the room, he seemed as my friend had described. Quite upset. Although he always looked like he was battling a stiff aftertaste. He asked me why I had run away and I said that I didn’t want to drink dirty water.

“That, son, is not dirty water,” he said, wearing a smile of ridicule.

“You washed that man’s feet in it,” I said, searching for a nod from Tanmay. But he sat there frozen, avoiding any eye contact.

“That man knows more about God than any of us.”

“He must still get dirty,” I said.

Tanmay’s father threw a glance at him, possibly questioning his choice in friends. “I feel you don’t know enough,” he said, turning to me. “Why don’t we change that? Ask me any questions you might have. I will not only answer them, but after our talk here, I will convince you why we do what we do.”

I surveyed the table: Tanmay’s grandmother, Tanmay’s father and Tanmay’s statue. Not only did I lack verbal support, but I feared if his father reached across the table and gripped my neck, Tanmay would be of no help. And his grandmother I suspected, from the expression she held, might just cheer him on.

But his father insisted that I ask. “For if you don’t ask,” he said, “you will never know.”

“Why do we touch the feet of elders?” I asked.

“As a sign of respect,” he said.

“Isn’t it enough that I respect them?”

“If you don’t show it, why bother?” he said.

“Would you rather abuse them?” said the grandmother.

I didn’t think those were the only two options. But I turned to the father, for he appeared to be the more reasonable of the two. “Tanmay told me you don’t have garlic and potatoes and all …”

“Nothing below the ground, no,” he said.

“Why?”

“It has bacteria. Bacteria is a living thing, son. It has feelings.”

I think he meant sensation. But sure, bacteria with feelings. “The man’s feet water – that had no bacteria?” I asked.

“What is wrong with this boy?” the grandmother said. “How can you speak like this about religion?”

“I am sorry,” I said. “But I don’t understand what religion is and what it is not.”

“And you won’t know if you don’t learn,” Tanmay’s father said.

“I am trying to … ”

“No,” he interrupted. “You only ask, but you also have to listen.”

“God gave him a mouth, so he must open it,” the grandmother said.

“I would listen if someone would answer,” I said, keeping my eyes on his father.

He leaned forward. “You are too young to ask these questions.”

“But aren’t you old enough to answer, Pa?” Tanmay said.

I glanced at the three-foot tall stick figure who had just stood up to a large man with five finger rings. His father shot him down with a stare and then he turned to me. There was a growl in his eyes.

“That man is the greatest man who ever lived. And when you had the opportunity, you didn’t do enough – comparing holy water to a potato. You are not even worthy of drinking the water of his holy feet,” he said.

I had finished my glass of milk and my biscuits. And clearly, I had overstayed my welcome.

“You should know, he is the holiest of men,” Tanmay’s father said.

“Still a man, uncle. With bacteria on his feet.”

Tanmay’s father shook his head. “Yes, but you don’t understand. That, son, is good bacteria.”

Perhaps, Tanmay’s father was right. Our talk had convinced me that there is a reason why we do what we do. And over the next few years, I heard this often – *The Good Bacteria Defence*. I associated this phrase with explanations that made no sense. Mostly, about religion. Sometimes about traditions. And almost always about rituals. *The Good Bacteria Defence* had me convinced that the Indian man does not understand the scriptures he

follows. And this has put him in the unfortunate position of trying to defend something he does not understand.

He must defend his irrational belief system. He must explain his illogical rituals. He must do what he can, to make himself seem reasonable, to make it look like he is perfectly sane as he drinks bath water. He must believe and not question. He must nod and not understand. And above all, he must carry around his good bacteria defence. How else will he conform?

Quality 2: A religious attitude

In the summer of 2002, I was fourteen and deep into my awkward phase. And it appeared, I was on some universal rejection list. My first crush turned me down with a quick No. So quick was her refusal that I had to beg her pardon. My clothes didn't fit. My nose didn't fit. It was as if it was preparing to launch off my face. Excess oil made its way out through acne. The smell from my feet had the power to silence a room. In just a couple of years, I had gone from a kid with cheeks like silk to a mutant with a swamp of pimples. I felt rejected.

So, when my father decided to exclude me from a family vacation, I demanded to be on that bus to wherever it was heading. Even if it was going down a damn hill. It turns out, the family which now included me was heading to support a friend of my father's.

The friend, Mr Kumar, was starting construction on a five-storey building where his family home had been. He had invited us for a prayer ceremony to lay the foundation stone. As Mr Kumar explained to my father on his arrival, it had been a long journey for both in getting this far. While we had made it to his house in a bus that had seemed to have an adrenalin junkie at its helm, Mr Kumar had successfully located every money-grabbing clerk within the local council. So, while we had risked our lives to get here, Mr Kumar had staked all his money into this venture. They both laughed at the observation and then quieted down upon realisation.

During the prayer ceremony, which took about the same time as a Bollywood film, the godman paused. And then he turned around abruptly, as though someone had tapped him on the shoulder. A grave look appeared over his face. After repeated queries, he said that the ghosts of Mr Kumar's ancestors were unwilling to grant him approval to build a five-storey

building on this site. Mr Kumar appeared defeated. His shoulders hunched and he put his head in hands. This was not a group he could bribe.

“What now?” he asked.

The godman’s solution was to travel to a holy place six hours south, and in another ceremony, to bathe in a body of water. Since Mr Kumar had too much at stake, he booked a bus. So, seven members of his family, four members of my family, the godman and his assistant set sail on winding roads to the south.

At midnight, we arrived. At dawn, we were in whites and awaiting instructions. Another godman and his assistant joined us. Like unsure umpires, the godmen consulted often. They led us to the body of water, which was the size of a toddler pool and filled with brown and green liquid. So not exactly a body of water.

The instructions were simple. As a choir chants, each of us were to take a dip into the shallow water and ask for forgiveness from our ancestors. I looked at my father. This was one of the rare moments that I noticed the fear in his eyes. He made it clear to everyone there that our ancestors didn’t need to get involved here. It might get confusing. Mr Kumar agreed as he stepped into the brown-watered pool, took a dip and rose, no longer in white clothes. The others followed. But then Mrs Kumar refused to step into the pool. She was like a child before a surgeon. Her husband first ordered, then pleaded, then begged and then ordered again. To break the loop, the instructors intervened and asked her to dip just the tip of her toe so we could move things along.

“But, what about the ancestors?” Mr Kumar asked.

“They will understand,” said the godman.

So, with a dip of half a red-coloured toenail, the ritual ended. And the family went inside to flush the crap off themselves. Two hours later we met at the bus, ready to head back. There, Mr Kumar informed us that the godman and his assistant had decided to stay back a few days to pay their respects to their maker. The godman had given Mr Kumar a sacred thread, which he had to tie to a tree near his land. And this would solve his problems. So, after taking the godman and his assistant on an all-expenses-paid trip to where they wanted to go, we started back. And since Mr Kumar

had decided to carry all the clothing from the ritual in a plastic bag on the front seat, I was no longer the smelliest thing on the bus.

My vacation was ending soon and another term of hostel life would begin. And each time I stepped out after a boarding school term, it seemed like the people around me were climbing the ladder of absurdity. For example, I had found in the summer of 2002, that people would happily take a dip into shit and urine if a godman instructed it. And that it is perfectly okay to be left out of family trips.

Quality 3: A simple misunderstanding of complex systems

A woman marries away. A man brings a woman into his house. He can do what he wants. She must do what his family wants. If she does not, he won't want her anymore. This pill, they call tradition. Although, its active chemical compound appears to be chauvinism.

At fifteen, I was unsure about the origins of some of our traditions, the bases of our practices and customs. One could say, I was trying to acquire a basic working knowledge of how our complex culture works. But I was failing, and miserably. Like an amateur in an advanced dance class, I was constantly out of step, often singled out, and falling over awkwardly.

Any question I had, any doubt I queried, invariably ended with the word 'culture'. There was no challenge big enough that culture could not curb. It was rock, paper, scissors, culture beats all.

And it was during this period that my sister had found use for me. She would take me to forced social gatherings as a carrier of common diseases. My job was to wait 15 minutes and then fake a headache, fever, lightheadedness, fatigue, diarrhoea, and if the situation required, an epileptic stroke. Fourteen minutes in, I was preparing for fatigue at a family friend's house, who also had a daughter who was my sister's age, when the girl's mother explained how my sister, like her daughter, would one day belong to another house.

"Why?" asked my sister.

"This is how our society works," she said. "I was born in my parent's house, and now, I live in uncle's parent's house."

“Only because uncle lives with his parents,” my sister argued. “If you and uncle buy a new house, you would live there together. And you have your own houses where you were born.”

“That is not our culture. You don’t just abandon your parents and go live in another house.”

“ … Unless you are a woman,” she mumbled below her breath.

And there it was: The first time that I witnessed the word culture knocked-down during an argument, even if through a whisper. And as I lay on the ground, attempting to froth from the mouth, I had never felt so optimistic. There was hope. And while they might never invite us to their house again, I had successfully faked a disease in every house on the street.

While it seemed like our culture and traditions and customs tilt heavily towards men, how society embraces these absurd practices had puzzled me. And it threw me off – the conversation – a woman validating and preaching male chauvinism. But over the years, I found that most men and women I came across were unsure of the boundaries of tradition. Unsure where tradition ends and where chauvinism begins. Where religion stops, and communalism begins. And what on earth is culture?!

Most of us confuse *sanskar* (values) with *sanskriti* (culture), and for me, this is a *samasya* (problem). And it appears we are unable to understand the basic terms of a complex system we are trying to operate.

Here, I offer an easy reference.

Each morning, after my wife is ready to leave for work, she will walk into our spare room, and look at herself in the mirror one more time. Only for a moment. She stands, looks at herself and leaves. I have never understood it. But, let’s examine this scenario:

It is a **habit** – if enough people start looking in the mirror before they leave for work.

Habit becomes a **custom** – if every morning, she looks in the mirror before leaving for work.

Custom becomes **practice** – if enough people look in the mirror before leaving, for years.

Practice becomes a **tradition** – if we can't leave the house without looking in the mirror.

Tradition becomes a **religion** – if we set up mirrors across the city and we believe God might strike us down, if we don't look in the mirror, and if we don't wash before looking at it. Also, mirrors are now tax deductible.

Religion becomes **communalism** – if we can't stand mirrors of a different brand.

Other important terms:

Society – people who look down on you for not looking at a mirror.

Chauvinism – a woman can't look at mirrors during her period.

Politicians – exploit mirror brand loyalty to land a job.

Godmen – claim to see something more than their reflection.

Festival – celebrating a mirror's birth.

Holy place – mirror factory.

Fanatic – in love with one's reflection.

Skeptic – questions our dependence on mirrors.

Atheist – does not believe the mirror has powers. Does not even own a comb.

There it is – the way my wife started a new way of life. That way of life is a **culture**.

Quality 4: Treat Bollywood films as sermons to society

Seventeen was a confusing age. While I appeared to be too old for certain things, like taking off my pants while charging towards a water fountain, I was not merely old enough for other things, like making love, particularly to other people.

During this time of measured freedom, I had decided to put all my energy into a role in the school production of a one-act play on gender equality. Later, my performance would be reviewed as 'extreme.' But during rehearsals, we had a different issue. A play on gender equality in an all-boys

school posed an obvious problem. This, illustrated by a conversation between a fellow cast member and me:

“Boys are playing all the girl parts,” I said.

“You mean, boys are in girl parts,” he corrected.

“No,” I said. “Boys are acting like girl’s parts.”

Irritated by our failure to construct a proper sentence to explain the problem we faced, we turned to our drama teacher. A Mr Dwivedi, who had penned the play, and was therefore unimpressed when his puppets complained that the female characters did not seem ‘real enough’.

“This is because,” he said, “you don’t understand girl parts.”

To solve this problem, he sat us down for a discussion on how sexism affects daily life. This topic again posed a problem as none of us had ever faced sexism, but unknowingly had enjoyed its benefits.

“Then why is the Indian man the way he is?” he asked with his hands stretched wide.

The boy playing a dying tree said, “Movies!” while maintaining his arched pose.

Mr Dwivedi considered this. “Okay, prove it,” he ordered. “We will meet in a week. A bag of chips to the boy who can tell me how our films have made the Indian man sexist.”

To most, a packet of chips is not incentive enough to operate with the madness of a warlord, but in a boarding school that bans outside food, this is fried potatoes and positional good[1].

Besides, I had a clear advantage. Owing to a childhood obsession with Indian cinema, I could identify almost any Bollywood film by a single line of dialogue, an opening frame or even the quality of the print. Sadly, this talent had no use in the real world. Or for that matter, in an imaginary one. Until this contest.

But while I sat down to write a scathing review of the influence of Bollywood on an Indian man, I found myself unsure. Not long before that moment, I was on my way to becoming the Indian man who conducts

himself to the standards set by Bollywood. His fashion cues and his desire to stare. His wedding rituals and what to wear. His willingness to resort to violence and his need to snare.

And it is only natural then that when the time comes to pass blame for how chauvinistic an Indian man behaves, Bollywood is the thread he pulls.

Sure, there is a lot one can learn from a Bollywood film:

1. You can choose love over religion, if you can beat up at least ten people.

2. A punch will almost always make you bleed from the corner of your lip.

3. A retrospective copyright law could potentially bankrupt Bollywood.

4. If you give children freedom, they will fall in love and stress you out (this one was for the parents).

But I wondered – is there a limit to the amount of blame with which we can burden our films?

I grew up in a small town, where internet arrived as an afterthought. And even after it came, it never worked. So, there was no way for me to tell how many Indian filmmakers plagiarised foreign cinema. It was only after I broadened my taste to French, British and American films (or whatever pirated copy the cable network operator was showing that week), I realised that some of my fondest childhood memories were punishable offences.

For example, in the remake of a Hollywood film about a serial killer who punishes his victims for the seven biblical sins, this genius selects his targets because they are the best husband, the best boss, the best friend and the best daughter. How he judged this remains the real mystery.

In another film, described as a social issue piece, after a rich brat rapes a woman and parades her naked, a judge sentences him to be her husband. Worse, since he is unhappy about marrying her, it is then up to her to win his affection – a proper penal penis poetic punishment.

There is no doubt that for every orgy of absurd customs, questionable morality and shaky logic, there is a Bollywood film. But to blame

Bollywood for the sexist set-up of society is perhaps giving it more credit than it deserves. Art imitates life, sure. But when art imitates other art that imitates life in another country – is this ‘art’ anything more than an imitation?

And I wondered – were we fair and equal before the invention of the movie camera?

So, for a bag of chips, I decided to explore if the invention of the movie camera had changed us.

The following week, for the drama discussion, I arrived with the VCR, the cassettes, and wrapped up wires. Even by dramatic standards, I was over-prepared. While the others spoke for a minute about their take on the subject, I had something more elaborate in mind. It took me an hour to set it up. First, the wires crossed, then we could only hear the sound, then the video appeared but with a purple tinge, and then the whole thing went black. Finally, I got it to work by standing next to the television and holding the wires. And while, by the time I got it to play, I had exhausted most, there were clear sounds of anguish when I paused the film.

“This is life before Bollywood,” I said. “Our great freedom struggle shot on an 8mm camera. And here, I believe you will find the problem.”

“I know the problem here,” said a cast member to another.

I pointed to the screen with my free hand. “There are hundreds of people listening to the leader who fought for freedom,” I said.

Mr Dwivedi appeared intrigued. Although, with his indifferent expression, one could never tell. “You have 10 seconds to explain,” he said.

I nodded, slowly, as a fan of the dramatic. “ … No women in those crowds,” I said. “Maybe two, in a crowd of hundreds.”

During our glorious freedom struggle, while leaders gave speeches against might before right, women were forced to stay at home. Most women could not step outside the house unescorted. Prevalent practices included public shaming, infanticide, dowry, sati and child marriage. So, while we were fighting for freedom, half of our population could not live according to their wishes. Whose freedom were we fighting for exactly? For a nation to be free? Or just for the Indian man to be free?

“The effect of films on our society is superficial,” I said. “We have always been sexist. Bollywood is only the medium to which we can point.”

Two things happened that day. One: Mr Dwivedi suggested that I open my packet of chips during the class and share with the rest of the group. And two: he replaced boys who were playing girl parts with girls from a local school. This meant that my role had reduced significantly. There was no longer a girl part for me.

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So, what makes the ideal Indian man? Is it his willingness to defend what he does not understand? Or the challenges he might take up in the name of God? Or is it what he blames for who he is? To answer this, one must look at what an Indian man is promised and what he gets.

He is given freedom of speech but threatened against its use. He is given the freedom to practice his religion, but only if he practices it the way they tell him he should. He is told he is equal before the law, unless the other guy knows someone on the inside.

So, what is an ideal Indian man? He is unfree. Culture oppresses him. Society at his throat. And his hands tied by cults. He can’t change anything he fears. But he forgets; he can question.

1 Something that you enjoy only because others around you don't have it – like "status" or "window seats".

Have you seen my freedom anywhere?

THREE

The unfortunate and deplorable

STATE OF WOMEN

FIRST, THE UNFORTUNATE.

It is my view that the modern Indian woman gets offered too limited a menu. She must choose between the traditional, the modern traditional and the traditional modern. None of this matters to her of course, since what she fancies are the specials at a different restaurant.

Families rarely gather without the promise of a meal. This makes our Sunday family lunches a roaring success. And during one such event, I read aloud from a newspaper the government's annual economic survey findings of the skewed ratio of men to women in India. Before I bring you into our lunchtime debate, here are some of their findings:

- *There are over 63 million fewer women than there should be, because of sex-selective abortions*.

- *Families, where a son is born, are more likely to stop having children than families where a girl is born*.

- *Indian girls receive less education, have poorer nutrition and get less medical attention than boys*.

- *Many women – including educated, wealthy women – say they face intense pressure, most often from mothers-in-law, to have sons*.

While this news had an all too familiar ring to it, one of their findings had me curious. The report estimated that more than 21 million Indian girls are not wanted by their families.

At the lunch table, once I read aloud the article, I turned to my family. "Thoughts?" I asked.

“Yes. Stop reading the newspaper aloud,” Mother said. “You’re not in a king’s court.”

“Alright,” I said. “Better thoughts then?” I turned to my sister.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But it’s the least of our problems.”

“You have two daughters.”

“I’m not talking about just me. Like when I talk about men, I’m not talking about you.”

I absorbed the insult with a smile. “What is it, then?” I asked. “Your biggest problem?”

She kept silent, considered my question and then she asked, “Do you know what makes Indian women special?”

“They tolerate Indian men?”

“Well, that too. But it’s something that men around us will never understand.”

“What is it, sis?”

“Women experience our country quite differently than men,” she said. “Again, men. Not you.” Her smile widened.

Being the youngest in my family, insults to me are like waves to a surfer. Sometimes I go looking for them and sometimes they come for me. But my sister’s statement left me confused. It was nothing I never knew, I suppose. But it was something I never knew she felt.

Growing up, I had experienced no difference between us. Sure, we had different curfew timing, and my parents accompanied her to school while they left me at a bus stop to reach mine. She got an allowance without asking while my petitions were denied all the time. So, I suppose there was a difference. She was the emerald of our family and I was the office shirt. But did it constitute a difference? Perhaps. But if women experience this country differently to men, how is it that men don’t realise this? Was she right?

It had me going through my days with an almost desperate curiosity. Say they do experience this country differently than men. But then, how must a

man understand the experience of a woman? It is one thing to know the struggles, quite another to understand their experience.

And so, I began to hunt for stories, from neighbours, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, strangers, anyone with anything to say.

a. The case of the obedient son

Samarth is an acquaintance. Long ago, without our consent, our families forged a bond, which forced our friendship and produced countless hours of awkward pauses. Recently, after years, we met at a café in Rome. Why? Well, because Indians who live in the same city and never meet must 'catch-up' if they are ever in the same city overseas. And so, we met up and picked up right where we left off, into yet another painful stretch of silence. Coffee, polite inquiries and loads of pauses. One of the hardest things since the invention of language, I assume, is to make eye contact with having nothing to say.

Then, he mentioned that his mother was looking for a bride for him.

"There's a messaging group," he said. "The broker posts photos, family approves, disapproves or grants permission to pursue."

"Shouldn't you be the one to …?" I asked.

"I am on the group too."

"Okay good … "

"But Mum must like her first."

"Sure," I said. "As long as she has a type."

It turns out, she does. Over four years, in her search for the perfect bride, Samarth's mother had come close to finalising a woman for her son. Samarth had even exchanged rings with her. They had argued over the honeymoon destination. And then, after he had booked non-refundable tickets to Hawaii via Jamaica, his family called off the wedding.

"She was sweet and fair. And an only child to a public-listed company," he said, leaving us no longer awkward only in pauses.

Samarth told me that the wedding fell through because of unresolvable issues between the two families. But he appeared reluctant to share further.

So, I didn’t push much. I pushed more of the uncomfortable silence.

“We wanted a proper wedding,” he said breaking the silence. “And a family that can make this happen.”

Proper is, Samarth explained, an amount his mother expected the bride’s family to spend. Samarth removed his phone and showed me a section of his messaging group. The picture of a woman. Under the picture, it read:

Broker: 26, dark, family money. Will pay quote.

Samarth’s mother: How dark?

At the time of writing, Samarth’s mother was still searching for a bride. If you know of someone, warn them.

b. The case of the well-intentioned rapist

Ramesh loved Shefali. They worked in the same team at a company in Bangalore. But Ramesh’s parents wanted a South-Indian bride. So, they had to break up. Shefali married another, leaving him with a heart that needed stroking. He still worked with her and he often spoke to his friends about how he wished he could win her back. But he feared it might be too late. His friends confirmed his fear. Then, one day, Ramesh found out that Shefali was having an affair with someone in the same office.

This drove Ramesh mad. Swayed by rage, he called up her husband and told him his wife was sleeping with a colleague. Shefali’s husband confronted her and in a moment of cowardice, she said Ramesh was lying because she refused his advances.

“He tried to rape me!” she added.

The husband was furious. He filed a complaint with the police and with the company. Shefali couldn’t back off now. It would ruin her marriage. The company fired Ramesh. Police arrested him. The court granted him bail, but not before he had spent eight days in jail among actual criminals. After a long drawn out investigation, they found Ramesh was innocent. But her lawyer then argued since Shefali and Ramesh had had an affair, it meant they could still try him for rape. Under the law in 2017, they claimed, even consensual sex in a long-term fling could be claimed as rape by the woman.

Consensual sex is rape when a man knows that he is not the husband of the woman.

To keep him out of prison, Ramesh's lawyer offered Shefali a monetary sum to settle the charges against his client. She agreed to more money than Ramesh could afford to pay. Ramesh sold off what he could, arranged for a loan and wrote her a cheque. Broke, spent, but cleared of the charges, Ramesh walked away with nothing. Two months on, Ramesh finally found another job. It did not pay much, but it was enough to get him off his friend's couch.

Meanwhile, Shefali also got an undisclosed sum from her company to not sue them, as the 'rape' allegedly took place often in the company bathroom and car park. Now, her colleague, the one she was having an affair with, wanted a piece of the settlement. But she denied him. So, he sent intimate pictures of them to her husband.

For a week, the husband mulled over it. Then he asked Shefali for the settlement money. For tax benefit, he told her. Once the money was in his account, he filed for a divorce. He met with Ramesh, apologised to him and returned his money. And on Ramesh's behalf, the husband filed a case against his previous employer for wrongful termination. *Phew!*

On the other front, Shefali's colleague complained to human resources. He alleged that she took advantage of her superior position to have sex with him. The company let her go. They compensated the boy for an undisclosed amount. They handed Ramesh a severance for wrongful termination to stop him from going to court. When Shefali returned to her parent's house in Ooty, she was a wreck. Her father heard her out in silence, then blew his top. He filed a case of blackmail against the colleague who shared her pictures. Company lawyers had had enough. They let the colleague go too.

A year later, Ramesh went to Ooty to win back the love of his life.

Idiots have no gender.

c. The case of social clockwork

Mumbai is the bubble India wants to be. There is a dome-like quality to the city that shields it from the problems of a country. Unless there is a riot elsewhere, that spreads to Mumbai with the enthusiasm of a revolution. But

Mumbai is different. And to the problems of its country, the people of Mumbai are, in a word, clueless.

They don’t want to be clueless. They want to know. They want to understand. But how do you understand something you don’t experience? This made an evening with Shef particularly interesting.

We met in a restaurant. We were the only ones there. Yet, our order was delayed. And when it finally arrived, it was cold. Shef complained as she went to battle with her food. She dined with careless hands. She swung her cutlery as she spoke and used the blunt part of her knife rather than the tip to slice sourdough.

When I brought up the subject of dowry, she shrugged with a tilt of the head. She believed our country had moved past, what she labelled as, ‘the problems of the 90s’.

“Last year, dowry-related crimes went up,” I said.

“In the north, sure,” she said. “Here, you don’t see that sort of stuff anymore. Bombay’s chill.”

When I told her Mumbai also saw an increase in dowry-related crimes, she responded with a nod.

“Yeah. I can tell you, those are the people who moved here. No one who grew up here would do this.”

This is, of course, the classic ‘you won’t see a beggar from my community’ defense. It is a wall you cannot cross and you will find another wall if you do. So, I digressed. And we spoke about marriage.

She considered the topic as she sawed through her toast.

“Here is something I never knew,” she said and gulped. “For women, social reminders are placed too well. All around. As though we’re wearing alarm-clock earrings.” She took a moment to verbalise her thoughts. “Say I have to go out of town on business, I get a reminder that I have kids. From anyone and everyone. Parents, in-laws, relatives, friends. The other day, I was working late and my colleague said – don’t forget you have kids,” she said. “If I am not home in time for dinner, the alarm goes off. If I am out late, the alarm goes off. I am here with you, let’s see how long it takes for it

to ring.” There was a pause. Then, she continued. “And the thing is, my husband has the same number of kids as me. I think. But no one reminds him.”

Shef explained that people appeared to treat her as though she suffered from social amnesia of sorts. “You forget and so you must be reminded.”

What a difference experience makes, I wondered. Only moments ago, a woman who appeared blind to the state of other women in other parts of the country spoke with such authority about issues she goes through. But this also makes me uncertain if I might ever understand how a woman experiences our country.

***

In my study, as I wondered what to make of dozens of stories like these, the chauvinistic tales of the twisted, it reminded me of something. Hoping to find a way to explain the state of women in our country, I found myself drawn to this one image from my childhood.

Back in the 1990s, before Indian car companies saw the need for reliable handbrakes, my grandfather used to keep a brick in the boot of his car. Before he would drive up the slope leading to the house, one of us had to jump out, grab the brick and wait for him to park the car. Then, we would slide it next to one of the rear tyres. Along with the handbrake and the gear locked into first, this would ensure the car didn’t roll away.

Grandpa forgot once and it ruined Mr Murty’s vegetable garden. And neighbours never let each other forget anything. So, no matter how tired we were, we had to place that brick.

During one summer holiday, my cousin (12), my sister (16) and I (13) decided to take grandpa’s car out for a drive. At 11 pm, once his snores struck a rhythm, we snuck outside with the keys to his car. The plan was simple. One of us would keep watch on the house, the other would remove the brick from under the tyre and the third one would back out of the driveway. But we forgot about the gate at the bottom of the slope. It was chained shut. The dream of our first unescorted drive was a quick bust.

But the next day, we had a new scheme. In the evening, we asked grandpa if he would park the car outside the gate as we wanted to play

cricket at dawn in the driveway. The sport made for a passable excuse. We figured, if he parked it outside, we might not need to combat a brick, a slope and a chained gate.

And later the same night, we crept out of the house, climbed over the wall, and got to the car. This time, there were no obstacles in our way. Until our neighbour, Murty uncle appeared.

“Here? At this hour?” he asked.

“Lost our ball,” we said.

He offered to help. But we chorused a “No.”

“Is the gate unlocked?” he said, panicking.

“Yes, we climbed over the wall …” said my cousin, before we nudged him from either side.

Mr Murty appeared suspicious. “I just put in the carrots, you know,” he said.

We assure him it was safe to walk away. But after he did, a team discussion followed. If we took the car now, Murty uncle might tell grandpa. He had the reputation of being a snitch, a mole, a rat. He looked like a rat too. Anyway, we climbed back into the house and called the night a failure. But, as we lay in bed, the final plan emerged.

The following evening at nine, while Murty uncle was at dinner, we snuck into the car and lay on its floor. For an hour, we spoke in whispers, like caged birds we moved, but we figured, for our first drive, it was well worth the trouble.

Murty came out for his post-dinner walk, which we realised was just a way for him to let out a few farts. Then, at 10:30 pm, we took our seats. We were ready. Only my legs reached the pedals, so there was little debate over who might drive. It had been days of training sessions in imaginary cars and watching grown-ups drive. Ignition. Clutch. Gear one. Leave it gently. Too gentle? Come on now. And we were off.

For the neighbourhood, we might have been cruising at a calm 10 kilometres per hour. Inside, we were pilots of a flopping aircraft. More like the Wright Brothers graduating from cycles to planes. As we got closer to

the end of the lane, confusion erupted over the turn I had to make. And we decided to go right when we should have gone left. The road to our right led us to a slope. The slope was as steep as a water park slide, descending deep towards the darkness, like a tongue into the night.

“Please stop!” my sister shouted.

“We have to get to the end,” my cousin said.

“Give me one direction,” I said.

“Stop!” both shouted.

I slammed on the brakes. We jerked to a stop – three frightened kids in a car midway through a sharp slope.

“Get out and get the brick,” I said, frantic.

Silence, as the image appeared – the brick lay on the slope, at the house.

“Well, find another brick then,” my sister said, as she got out of the car.

My cousin followed. As they searched for a brick, they disappeared into the night. And to this day, I wonder about that moment. A thirteen-year-old in charge of which way the car might go. At that moment, yes, I was afraid I had done the wrong thing. But I was the only one holding the car in place. I was a kid in a car on a steep slope. No clue how to get us out of this mess. But I was also the only one who could. I had slammed onto the brakes, brought the car to a halt and I was unwilling to let go because I didn’t know any better.

And back in my study, I wondered about this moment. I felt what I was doing to my grandfather’s car was what Indian men are doing to the issue of women’s empowerment. We are sort of like thirteen-year-olds behind the wheel of a car, stuck midway on a slope. We don’t know how to take it forward, and so, we keep it from moving. It is the only way we know how to keep us safe because we are afraid of where it might lead if we let go. And some of us are finding bricks of religion, history and precedents to make sure this issue remains halted in its tracks.

Well, now that that fits beautifully, let’s proceed.

***

A woman from Vasant Vihar in New Delhi told of how she faced the problems of dowry. A woman from Breach Candy in South Mumbai denied it happened to women around her and she believed it. Also, who names a suburb Breach Candy? It sounds like the mission of a six-year-old. But compare the helplessness of the woman from Gurgaon to an ignorant Mumbai idealist, or to a woman from Meerut who calls it the norm, and you begin to understand the broken, disconnected societies that keep women apart. It is as though they are speaking a different language. Discussions on dowry differ according to the ‘society’ to which the speaker belongs. And it occurred to me that, while men don’t understand how women experience this country, women too often struggle to understand how other women experience this country.

I am no detective. But at times, I fancy playing one: like if there is a dent on my car, or the bristles of my toothbrush are wet before I have used them or if the strand of hair on my soap has moved.

So, I return to the annual economic findings. Before I understand experiences, I figure I must follow the problems. From problems emerges plight, I suppose. But soon, I realise that we misunderstand the difficulties of women in our many societies. Allow me to elaborate:

The world of the unborn

For this part of the tour, for this ride, imagine you can see nothing. Your eyes are closed. You are alive, but not yet born. This world of the unborn is simple. You are fed through a tube and you are meant to do little through an earth day, except to grow and kick. You are part of no country, society, religion, caste or community. To you, these words don’t exist. Words don’t exist. Right now, you are in your mother’s womb. Consider this your world.

You wonder about the world out there. Faint sounds pique your interest. Mainly, mother’s voice. At times, the ignition of a car, the fluctuation of phones and screens, ringtones and beeps. It sounds chaotic and annoying, but also exciting. You hear your mother speaking to a doctor. Having listened to the word ‘ultrasound’ a dozen times, you think they’re checking up on you, again.

“I’m fine, people,” you say. But they can’t hear you.

Then, one day, you hear the word ‘girl.’ You figure, that is you. You don’t quite know the difference. But as your mother takes in the news, her body is tightening up. The people around her appear unhappy. She is unhappy. You can feel it. You are connected. You think it is a bad thing, being a girl. Why? What does it mean? You wonder. And then, you hear your mother agree to an abortion.

“Too late,” you say. “I’m alive. I’m here.”

But they cannot hear you, remember. The operation is starting now. And in a few seconds, you will no longer be alive.

“I don’t want to die,” you shout. But, nothing. “Why?” you ask.

Nothing.

Listen to me. While you might consider your mother’s womb to be your world, there is another world outside. A world where sex-selective abortions are usual practice. Illegal, nevertheless usual.

“Don’t they have enough money to feed me?”

Money is never enough, kid.

“Mother, don’t let them take me,” you say. “Is someone forcing her?”

It is possible that your mother does not understand her rights.

It is possible it is not her decision. And it is possible, she does not want you.

You can feel the doctor’s hands coming. You shout, “How can a woman do this to another?”

What if I tell you, your parents belong to a nation that is responsible for killing over 100,000 unborn girls a year. What if I tell you, in this country alone close to 4,000 other unborn Indian girls have been killed before you this year, would that make you understand?

“I have to believe my mother is doing this for a reason. She must have a reason.”

Suit yourself, kid.

“Where in this world am I? I’d like to know.”

The gloved hands have taken you away and pulled you to your death. We've reached the end of the tour.

You are no longer alive.

Your eyes are open.

But I will answer your last question on the condition that you fill out this declaration:

"I was to be born to Indian parents, to a nationality where over 100,000 sex-selective abortions take place annually. I was born to Indian parents in a country called _____."

Answer: I was to be born to Indian parents, to a nationality where over 100,000 sex-selective abortions take place annually. I was born to Indian parents in a country called *England. My Indian parents had a combined annual salary of over £ 170,000. After my death, they had a boy. They kept him*.

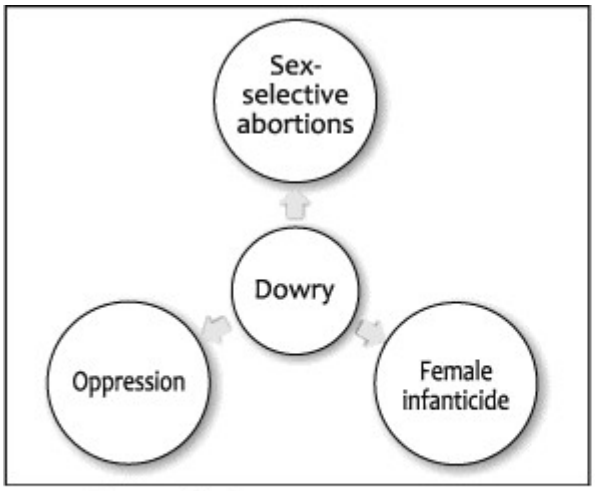
In our country, more unborn girls are aborted annually than the number of soldiers that have died on our borders since independence. And for this, we blame the poor, the illiterate and the unaware. And by doing so, we misrepresent the issue. Consider this:

In 2013 to 2014, over 2000 sex-selective abortions were reported in the city of Mumbai.

Such a statistic is misleading in the depth and the type of the problem which we face. We are looking in the wrong place. The rich don't get abortions in India. Their body count won't be found in the 19 female foetuses floating in a drain near a local hospital in the Sangli district of Maharashtra. They sidestep the legal landmines by catching a flight to a place where sex determination won't land them in prison. If they discover a girl in the womb, they get her aborted before their return. And their hands appear clean. Their numbers don't make it to the official sex-selective abortion survey. And while the underprivileged face pressures of a society created by the rich, for the wealthy business-class travellers, it is either lineage or drainage.

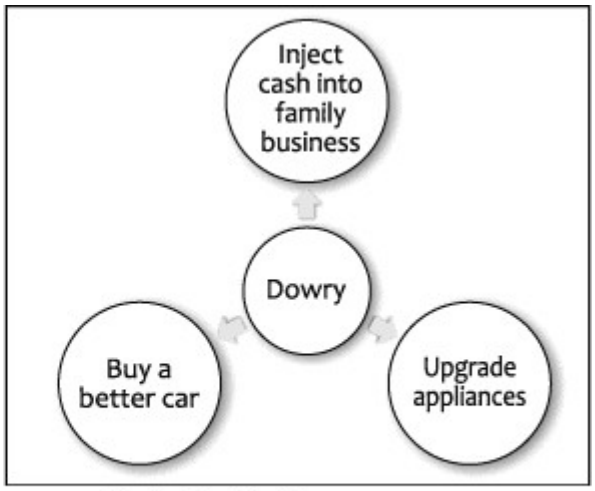
The dowry estate

Unofficially also known as the respectable family crime, dowry is the germ of oppression of Indian women.



Point of view – women:

The molecule of harassment



Point of view – men:

A possible start-up funding module

While it is one of the most offensive of social crimes, it appears to be wildly popular among families with men of ‘marriageable’ age. Which begs the question, how can something which hurts one family to such an extent be irresistible to another?

I will let Rotten explain.

Rotten was a man I met on a train from Chandigarh to Delhi. Rotten is an attempt to blur his real name, but it carries a similar ring. On his way back from his family home, where he had spent New Years’ Eve, Rotten subjected me to one of life’s more interesting conversations.

First, he asked me what I did for a living.

“Well, Rotten, I wake up in the morning and I try and put a few words together,” I told him.

“You must love what you do,” Rotten replied.

“I sure do, Rot. How about you?”

“Studying to be a civil servant,” he said.

“Anything in particular?” I asked.

“Administration – the best one.”

“How so?”

“It doesn’t matter where you’re posted. Good *kamayi* (unofficial earning, bribes). Everyone wants it.”

“And is this your first attempt?”

“Third,” Rotten said. “Final. I got through preliminaries. Must clear the main examination. Then, I can get married.”

“Clear an exam to marry? Brilliant!”

Rotten smiled. And then he gave me an answer, or what I refer to as the *number five of the top five sermons of my life*. And I share this with you as an answer to the question of how literacy affects our awareness.

In Rotten’s words: “I wanted to marry before the exam. But my father said no. He said, some men get to *settle* for dowries. Civil officers can *demand* it. My elder brother works for the railways. He married before his selection. And we got nothing from the bride’s family. And whenever the topic of marriage comes up, our father says the same thing. *Get selected, then we ask with pride*.”

“What if they ask you a question about dowry in the exam,” I said. “Will you write what you told me?”

He laughed. And he said, “You don’t know the half of it. The better the rank, the bigger the car, the better the house, the more the cash.”

“But still someone else’s money, isn’t it?”

The question irked him. “She is my wife. It’s only fair,” he said.

“Right. Here’s a true or false question for your civil exam,” I said.

“Ask anything,” he said.

“Taking dowry is a crime.”

“Oye, Mader@##$#%!”

“So, true?”

Rotten had confirmed my doubts. A literate mind is not the same as an educated mind. In fact, in our country, literacy is being ‘rewarded’ with a dowry. Absorb this for a second. The reward for achievement is a crime.

How does awareness help, if it only encourages the corrupt? Compare the 5,000 dowry-related deaths reported in 2005 to 7,600 in 2016, and it makes you wonder if awareness works? When it comes to sex-selective abortions and dowry, there are a lot of Rottens out there. So many, who are literate and aware. But how can we fix it, if we misread this as the problem of a single section of society?

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It appears that how an Indian woman experiences this country depends on one key event – marriage. Unfortunately, it appears that for most women in our country, marriage divides their life between the years leading up to it and the years that follow. But this is also the event that shines a light on why the experiences of the two sexes differ.

Consider this: in our country, marriage is the machine by which a woman leaves a way of life to lead another, leaves a religion to follow another, and leaves her community to join another. She travels between the orthodox and the progressive. Between the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’. She switches between families, time periods and realities.

Compare this to an Indian man – who is stuck. Like a plant in the family soil, he stays where he is born. In his community, in his religion and among his people. Inside his bubble. Always. He experiences a singular way of life and appears reluctant to the idea of an alternate path. And perhaps, a woman experiences man as a resistance.

She is fluid. She can travel through time. And he is a potted plant in his family soil.

And as you might imagine – a potted plant is ill-prepared for time travel.

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NOW, THE DEPLORABLE.

In our country, the umbrella term given to sexual offences ranging from harassment to assault, from remarks to groping, is *eve-teasing*. The only condition is it must take place in a public space. In eve-teasing, the name *Eve* comes from the first woman according to the ‘creation story’ and the term teasing places the blame on the woman of being a tease. Eve’s nature of being a temptress is making the Indian man helpless. So eventually, to protect women from being harassed in public, we pass a bill. And we call it the ‘*The Delhi Prohibition of Eve-teasing Bill 1984*’.

In a restaurant at Lower Parel in Mumbai, I met a journalist. Call her Anamika. She had been a news anchor for two years until an internal coup saw her thrown to a reclusive corner in the research department. Part of her new duties was to report on sexual crimes.

Every morning, with her coffee, Anamika took in the gruesome details of sexual crimes. This was over 800 rape cases a week and over a thousand sexual assaults and attempted rapes. She must begin by looking at the story. Was it rape and murder, gang rape, mutilation? How did the system fail them? Did the police fail to record a complaint? Did the attacker get enough time to leave the state or country? In case the accused was influential, did the cops intimidate the victim and her family against filing a complaint? Anamika looked at 800 awful narratives. Then, among the terrible, she must search for the dreadful and report only the ‘newsworthy’ to the news team.

Newsworthy is, she explained, a case that the news team can take on air in a big way. “For news channels, rape stories are no longer enough,” she said. “They need an angle. A religious, communal or class angle.” Anamika reckoned that to blame for this was the growing indifference of their audience. Rape cases filled newspaper columns and grids. “No use blaming the reader or the viewer. When news channels focus on the religion or the community of the rapist, rather than the crime, what do you think the viewer takes away from it?”

But while it has always been a struggle to convince the news team to bring more attention to the victims, of late, she was failing more than ever.

“News teams look at these stories from a different vantage point. News is interested in reactions to their news,” she said. “One story filters through, maybe. And then, the reactions start pouring in.”

And this, Anamika said, was hugely damaging to the story. And what she called a *mouth fart*.

Often branded as ‘controversial comments’ by mainstream media, a mouth fart is deeply disturbing and terribly damaging. But highly profitable for news channels. Therefore, widely propagated. In most cases, this follows a story on sexual crime. Some noteworthy mouth farts included:

“Rape is a social crime, which depends on men and women. Sometimes it’s right, sometimes it’s wrong.”

– A Member of Parliament from Uttar Pradesh.

“Women should not venture out in the dark.”

– A politician from Andhra Pradesh.

“Boys and girls should be married by the time they turn 16, so that they do not stray … this will decrease incidents of rape.”

– Leader of Khap panchayat.

This was a special one. Some context here: a member of the legislative assembly (MLA) was accused of rape. And a former home minister made this comment:

“If he wanted to contest from his seat and become an MLA, he should have committed the crime after the elections.”

But this next one takes the cake of all mouth farts. Bask in it, if you will:

“Chow mein leads to hormonal imbalance, evoking an urge to indulge in acts such as rape and sex. You also know the impact of chow mein, which is a spicy food, on our body. Hence, our elders too advised to eat light and nutritious food.”

– Khap panchayat leader.

“And just like that,” Anamika said, “the news gets louder. Anchors, nastier. We get busy dissecting a mouth fart and demanding an apology. And soon, no one can even remember which of the hundreds of rapes a day triggered the comment.” she paused. “The problem with a mouth fart is that it can derail an entire news narrative. And the audience forgets the victim.”

“Maybe politicians know this,” I said.

“They know. Politicians own most of the news channels in one way or another. They know all about *TRPs*[2],” she said. “You must understand, our news channels hold women’s empowerment events, but the news is designed specifically for men.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Our advertisers pay for a male audience. We might have women news reporters and women-centric programming sometimes. But the news channel is about the man. When the numbers come in, only male viewership matters,” she said, and then with a smile, she continued. “My first week on the job. During a pitch meeting, my boss told me I hadn’t quite understood the way news work. And he wrote on the whiteboard – Men make better experts. Women make better victims. Unless it is a gender issue.”

“Absurd,” I said.

“ … the state of women,” she added.

The virgin solution

In our country, there are about 40,000 rapes a year; 3,334 rapes a month; 110 rapes a day. Every 15 minutes, a woman is experiencing the most horrific moment of her life.

Knowing this, each morning, Karan dropped his wife Sonali to a cab. And until she reached her office in Gurgaon, he tracked her cab on his phone. In the evening, when Sonali left for home, his forty minutes began again. Even though things are getting worse, Karan was hopeful that change was coming.

To make a difference, Sonali joined her friends in a citywide protest march against sexual crimes. During this rally, workers of a local political party stare from the sidewalk and made sleazy remarks.

Two months later, come elections, Karan voted for the same local political party, knowing well the kind of goons they bred, only because they belonged to his community. The goons retained office. And during the inauguration ceremony for the new government, Karan was busy tracking Sonali’s cab. Still hopeful that things might change.

When Sonali voiced her frustration, others around us shared her anger. A woman's memory, as a twelve-year-old girl of a man masturbating outside her school campus as he stared at her. Another, of an air-hostess who caught a senior consultant trying to take pictures of her from under her skirt as she ate dinner at a restaurant. And another, of a woman being groped as she left a stadium. It was troubling, the indifference with which they recounted experiences of sexual harassments and assaults.

Among them was Nisha. Nisha wrote code for a living and she spoke like she typed. Without expression or pauses. And she said, "Someone should look into the number of rapes committed by virgins."

First, there was silence, then an argument erupted. And as it generally happened with gender issues, the loudest one won. Nisha backed away in silence.

But her suggestion stuck with me. Why did she say that? How was looking for virgins who have raped going to help? Worse, wasn't it ignoring the victim? There was one rule for a crime. Was it committed?

So, the following morning, I wrote to Nisha:

> *Hi Nisha,*
>
> *Yesterday, you said something that I am finding hard to shrug off. Could you explain what you meant? How will it help, if someone looks into the number of rapes committed by virgins?*
>
> *Regards, Daksh*
>
> *Daksh,*
>
> *The blame of crime is on law and order. Of desperate crime is on us.*
>
> *Before rape becomes another semantic satiation ...*
>
> *Nisha*

I had to look up the meaning of the phrase *semantic satiation*. It is a phenomenon in which repetition causes a word to lose meaning for the listener temporarily. After a point, it becomes a meaningless sound.

Rape rape rape

She looked up at me. “So, tell me, why is there more outcry if a man of a different community or religion rapes a woman than if one of her ‘own’ rapes her?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but I realised I did not have an answer.

“Religion and community place men in a superior position. Illusionary, but superior. But what empowers you, also suffocates you,” she said. “If a person has never had sex before, and for the first time, he tried to rape a girl, how miserable might his state of mind be? Can we change that? Can we prevent a woman from being assaulted?”

***

There are two parts to this chapter – the unfortunate state of women and the deplorable one. The unfortunate state of women stems from peoples’ mentality and damaging values passed on through generations. The deplorable state of women is the unfortunate state of mind of most men in our country. Don’t confuse the two.

2 Target rating points

Kids are the future, as we were once.

It is a nominal title. Best not to get too attached.

FOUR

Let us pretend we are the ones

RAISING KIDS

I believe school report cards are now booklets that map the behaviour of a child. This is because the ones reading these booklets are parents, who believe how well their child conforms to a syllabus somehow reflects on them. This makes me believe that what most Indian parents look for in their child's report card is a validation of their parenting style.

In our part of the world, everything a child does appears to be a reflection on the parents. The blame of credit begins at birth. Gender is a big blame item. Progress is an early indicator. How quickly you sit, crawl, talk, and how you greet the ones you meet, what you eat, how you chew, in what shape you leave the loo. With high school forms a diffused reflection appears. What subjects you choose, what profession you pick, how you dress and how you wear that hair on your head. In adulthood appears the truth. Whether you invest in shares or live day to day with little to spare, if you marry, when you marry, whom you marry, how you marry, whether you split, how many kids you add to the tally, and finally, how you raise those kids, who in turn reflect on the entire family.

But I wonder if we overestimate our influence on our children. Are we really the ones raising our kids?

1. The logic of alliances

An adult Indian brain, I believe, is unique. And this goes beyond its urge to risk its life multiple times a day simply to cross a road or the way it reaches for a ringing phone while speaking on another. There is something truly special about a fully formed Indian brain.

Consider this:

In our country, there are 1.35 billion people; 60,000 villages; 3,000 towns; 8,000 cities and 5,000 castes and communities.

And yet, the moment we hear a full name, we can figure out that person in a fraction of a second. Instantly, we know how to speak to them. We know their preferred trade, business acumen, expertise, ambition, traits, eating habits, festivals, religious practices, dependability, shrewdness, history, geography, attire, challenges, dowry demands, friction within their community, level of hatred with ours, hostility with others. In a moment, we can put a person through this Social Indian Database and completely alter our behaviour.

How can the Indian brain not be special?

This database makes interactions exciting, especially if you give the wrong name. But what this also means is that the moment you draw your first breath, your choices are severely reduced. You are a category in a catalogue. You must fit in a box. Stand in a spot. Only because if you behave like you are meant to, it is easier for others to figure you out. And perhaps, more comfortable for you as well to understand others. So, you find your place and check off the points that you require to conform. So, before any parenting style comes alive, you have picked the portion of life. I am this and therefore, I must behave this-like.

Consider this scenario: In Amritsar, there lives a woman. Let’s call her *Amrita Sar*. Like the rest of us, Amrita goes through her day unnaturally but seamlessly shuffling through behaviour on cue from this *Social Indian Database*. She speaks a certain way to her husband, another way to the man who comes home to clean the bathrooms and differently to her cook; a fourth way to the vegetable vendor; a fifth she reserves for a woman from a

different community; a sixth way to her daughter's friend who believes in a different God; a seventh way with her son's friend who she thinks might make a good husband for her daughter, but swiftly shuffles back into sixth when she realises he is from a community that demands gold nuggets as dowry. But then, she figures, if they take dowry, it means they might give something too. So, she clutches into seventh with the son's friend, until he reveals he does not have a sister. Six it is, she settles.

And like most parents in our part of the world, Amrita carries a *No-No List*.

A *No-No list* is a secret catalogue kept in the family heads. It gets its name from our habit to repeat things. How was the film? Okay-okay. When do you want it? Fast-fast. Where are you? Coming-coming. And in that tradition, is the *No-No list*, which the heads of a family hand down to their younger ones. This list contains names of communities with whom the children in the family must not fall in love. Or marry, whichever comes first.

To convey a *No-No List*, one must speak in a low baritone, accompanied by a swinging finger and a frown. And one must repeat this often to get the point across. But the first time it comes out, is when one of the parents realises that their child has made a 'good' friend from a community on the list. First, the list serves as a warning. Then, as a threat, and parents might even freeze their children's allowances to get them to cut ties with said community. Earlier, this list used to contain only communities, because most subcontinent parents assumed the opposite sex was a given. But now, some parents have an opposite sex clause too. Oh, how times change!

And the reason for communities making this list can range anywhere from violence to hearsay. For example, in the case of Amrita Sar, she had boarded the *Kacheguda Express* and was searching for her seat, when a man burped in her face. This was enough for her to strike off his entire tribe. She made a note – *They don't brush their teeth*. And long ago, she made an update to her social database.

The problem arises when Amrita's daughter, call her *Ooty*, falls for a man who belongs to the 'burping folk'. And one day, over lunch, when Ooty breaks this news, Amrita turns red. Amrita has the rage of the gods. And like the gods, she must dance it off. Luckily, she knows her scriptures well

enough to perform around the lunch table. The hour turns operatic. Shrieks and shouts, eyebrows all around. Some tears wiped, others left to hang off chins.

Amrita threatens to withhold the family jewellery from her. This does not work. So, she warns Ooty, she will give all the jewellery to her son. Call him *Humpi*.

Humpi says he will give his share of the jewellery to Ooty.

“We’ll see what your wife has to say about that,” Amrita tells him.

When Ooty doesn’t listen to reason, Amrita calls upon the family elders – aka *The Unreasonables*. They enact emotional scenes. Take her through case studies of inter-caste, inter-community, inter-religion and even international marital disasters. But they can’t wash off the man from her mind. So, her father intervenes. Call him *Jharkhand*.

Jharkhand approves the wedding and urges others to support her. And so, Ooty marries the love of her life.

But now, Amrita must find an eighth way to deal with Ooty’s in-laws. None of them has burped in her face during the ceremony, but she maintains a safe distance during conversations and even stumbles into an abrupt monologue on the ineffectiveness of modern toothbrush bristles.

Soon, one of four things will happen:

1. Amrita will learn that it was a man and not an entire tribe that went without brushing. And she will make a correction in her head.

2. The new family will disappoint her and the database will update the reasons to more than just burping. In this case, her head will remain uncorrected.

3. Because Amrita wants so desperately for her database to be right, she will point out the smallest of their mistakes and club it with “no wonder they don’t brush their teeth”. Ooty will try to convince Amrita that her husband’s brushing regime extends far beyond just brushing. There is flossing, mouthwash, mints and once a week, honey. Amrita will misconstrue this as Ooty’s shifting loyalty.

4. One of the in-laws will actually burp in her face. In which case, Amrita will go around town spreading the word, like a virus. An *Amrita-virus*.

Eventually, whatever form this *No-No List* takes, it will pass on to Humpi, who will tell his wife about his idea to give the family jewellery to his sister. And this will trigger a dance of a different kind.

And this logic of alliances extends beyond the *No-No List*. Your surname defines with whom you do business, the neighbourhood you pick to live, who can buy an apartment in certain buildings, whom your family picks to marry, and even at times, what issues hurt you.

If your surname decides what issues hurt you, then I wonder – is our parenting style anything more than moulding more of the same?

2. Who raises a village

I envy kids for the ease with which they rebel against authority. The younger the kid, the greater the rebellion. A nine-year-old will cross her arms and fold up with a frown over a request to drink milk. A two-year-old will, without a second's hesitation, take a dump in the middle of a busy restaurant. And if you feed a one-year-old something it does not desire, it will drop its jaw and let it leak. Truly commendable, a child's defiance against being tamed.

But unlike adults, kids are surprisingly open to ideas. When my uncle told me it was wrong to eat eggs, I agreed. And the following morning, at the breakfast table, when my father asked me to stop banging to death the cutlery, I told him about my decision.

"You don't like eggs?" he asked.

"I do. But uncle told me not to have them."

"Okay. Did he give you a reason?"

"I didn't ask."

"You should ask," he said.

"So, I should eat eggs."

"That's not what I'm saying."

"What are you saying?" I asked, confused.

"Always ask, before you change your mind," he said. And then he followed it with two mumbled words, which became the guiding force of my life: "Question everything."

Soon, I was questioning everything.

He'd say, "Go to school."

I'd say, "Why?"

He'd say, "Do you have to ask?"

"Should I not?"

The point is, I took something from a conversation about eggs and made it my life's mantra. Impossible for my father to predict. And this is precisely why bringing up children is the hardest craft in this world.

But while questions formed a large part of my childhood, adulthood dulled my thirst for answers. I began to accept what I did not understand. And here I find a striking contrast to the way a child's mind works.

During a seventh-standard oral test, my history teacher asked the question, "Where was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi born?"

"Gujarat," I said.

"Wrong!" she said. "The correct answer is Bombay Presidency."

"I think they call it Mumbai now."

"Not Mumbai the city. Bombay the state."

"Did they make another state already?"

"No," she said. "Under the British, Maharashtra and Gujarat were part of one state – called Bombay."

" … But Porbandar is in Gujarat?" I said, hesitating.

"Yes, but he was born in Bombay Presidency, not in Gujarat," she said, in a dire tone. "What exactly is confusing you?"

"It's just … If Mahatma Gandhi was not born in Gujarat, why on earth did they make Gujarat a dry state?"

While this did not go down well with my history teacher, I had said aloud a question that had come to mind. As an adult, I could never question this. No way would I say it in public. And I certainly would not write it in a book. Because you see, adults tend to avoid asking questions that might get them into trouble. But a child's mind works differently. It questions because it must.

And the question I have often wondered about is – why do we stop? Why do we begin accepting things only because the people around us accept them? What our school report booklets don't tell us is perhaps the most important of all.

We prefer to bring up followers.

It starts with school report booklets, sure. But there are more booklets to be filled. How well we embrace traditions we barely understand and how closely we follow customs that make sense to no one. It appears someone is always marking us on it and providing feedback to the ones around us. Someone is always looking if we conform. And perhaps why, somewhere along the line, we stop questioning our behaviour.

Before you question listen

Don’t question, listen first

Don’t question, first listen

Don’t question, until you listen

You listen, but do you understand

Why question, when you understand

Don’t question, listen and understand

If you understand, practice

Don’t question, practice what you understand

Why question, when you practice

Don’t question, practice answers all

Only question is, are you one of us?

If you question, you are not one of us

If you question, what did you understand?

If you question, you are not one of us

Why question, when you are one of us

Don’t you want to be one of us?

Then don’t question

Follow, and you will be fine.

***

Growing up in a country with a billion people, the first uncomfortable question you ask your parents is not where children come from, but why are there so many of them. The answer, of course, is that almost anyone can have children. Even people who don't want to have kids, sometimes end up as parents. We need a permit to build houses. A certificate to ship things. But to make people, we have an unrestricted licence. And this is perhaps, a good thing. For if the lawmakers of our country had any say in it, things would spiral out of control quickly. They would gag it with restrictions. They would limit the number of attempts you get to make a baby – three attempts for the general category, seven for the reserved. You can't try for a kid after thirty. And each kid is taxable, even the ones that may not be very bright. Of course, farmers would be exempt from child tax. A particular celebrity might try and conceive on a farm just to get this exemption. There is a market for community specific condoms. Different condoms for different communities, made with love by 'your' people, and no other. Before putting on a condom, you *must* put it through a ritual. Dip it in water, boil it with spices, shower it with flowers. And then get its serial number notarised. And only then, you must slide it on with only your right hand. A difficult task, we might find. Preachers would step in, possibly after foreplay, to bless the couple with a prince. With preachers in the picture, things often escalate. Sexual communalism swells. *Missionaries* attacking *Sixty-Niners*. *Cowgirl-ing* couples assassinated for letting women on top – activists in arms for anal.

Things could sink in a blink.

I suppose it is a good thing then that we can have kids when and how we want. And that we can raise kids the way we think best. But while governments don't have much regulation over our children, we put them through some anyway. Perhaps, we are afraid that if we do not, they might turn out different from us. Our pride comes from our diversity, but how diverse is a culture that makes more of the same?

If you are born in a bracket, inside a pre-made jacket, told to live, love, work and play as a pack, exist like a primitive tribe, what choices do you believe you have? How many times did you truly explore a new religion or the absence of one? And by truly, I mean with a view to follow and not just discredit and shun.

Ask yourself, are you a category in a catalogue? Your logic of alliances skewed, your path in life bracketed, and your eyes closed to adopting the ways of an ‘outsider’ without once considering its merit? Forget that, can you even name your child from a fable from a religion that is not ‘yours’?

If not, then continue pretending you are the one raising your child.

A fart is proof that we are connected.

Air out of someone’s arse is inside your nose.

FIVE

A sense of belonging

INHERITANCE

The notion of trying to make friends in high places seems absurd, when you consider what they must have done to get there. As a rule of thumb, I avoid the company of people who talk about money, handbags, post-80s cars (which are just computers on wheels) and inheritance laws. The first three I might overlook if I have direct access to an exit. But, barring lawyers, if a man in his thirties exhibits deep knowledge of inheritance law, I steer clear. Chances are, he likes the smell of other people's money.

An obsession with monetary inheritance will ruin your days, abandonment of it will nag the nights out of your eyes, and discussion on it holds no value. But as I waited in a queue of stationary cars at a toll booth in Uttar Pradesh, I couldn't help but think about monetary inheritance.

Each year, the government inherits 40 per cent of our income. Add to it, the taxes we pay on purchases, land ownership and car registrations, and we are passing on well over 50 per cent of our income to a fund that is in the foster care of politicians. And after inheriting over 50 per cent of a woman's annual earnings, they can't even ensure she gets home safe.

So, every time a camera catches a politician hurling abuse at a toll booth operator and refusing to pay ₹ 100, I find a few things wrong with it.

First, that is our ₹ 100 in his bloated wallet.

Second, we paid for his bulletproof car.

Third, we paid for his bodyguard, who crumples the collar of the toll booth operator's shirt.

Fourth, we bought the bodyguard his rifle.

Fifth, our money went into the toll booth that the politician’s goons are smashing with sticks and slippers.

Sixth, we pay the salary of the toll booth operator and hopefully his medical expenses.

Seventh, the camera that records this dispute belongs to the taxpayer.

Eighth, the police officer they call is on our payroll.

Ninth, we bought the police officer his car, which runs on the fuel money we gave.

So when the police officer asks the bruised toll booth operator to back off and offers the politician a free pass, the taxpayer has lost a lot more than ₹ 100. Meanwhile, we sit in our cars, wondering what caused the pile-up. Amazing, what an idiot can do with inheritance.

But monetary inheritance is far from fascinating. What interests me is the inheritance of a different kind. Our ability to collect and store the ideas of previous generations. Something we excel at more than any other animal on the planet. This is one of our greatest skills. To inherit and impart. Sometimes, to inherit, exaggerate and then impart. A sparrow will not avenge an electrical board for his electrocuted grandfather. But our children might avenge the family of sparrows for dying on a wire and falling on our porch.

As I drove past the broken toll booth, I wondered if the ideas we pass on have relevance.

The daughter-in-loss

In a hired eight-seater car, seven are heading for a wedding in the hills. I had hired a car, because during winter, New Delhi smog fumigates tourists and a flight to Delhi will take you to Jaipur instead. I would have cancelled as there is rarely anything more satisfying than a genuine excuse, but my wife was already at the venue. And there is not an excuse genuine enough to convince a spouse. So, I had to hire a car. And then the groom requested that I bring along his friends too.

The passengers comprised of a single woman, one married woman travelling without her spouse, two couples and the driver – me. And this

combination posed a familiar problem. The very Indian problem of who sits where. First, an Indian man must always take the passenger seat next to the driver. Generally, this is the first man to reach the car. Whether he adds any advantage to the speed of the car remains a mystery.

So, then we had to arrange a married man, a single woman and three married women. This posed a more complicated problem. A married Indian man must not sit next to a single woman he does not know. It is as if a slight rub of the shoulders might lead to accidental intercourse. It also tells me that an Indian man is highly unreliable since he cannot even sit cordially next to a woman other than his wife. The man cannot sit between two married women, because on one side would be a woman who was not his wife, and also because a man is reluctant to sit on the middle seat. So finally, after several shuffles, one couple agreed to take the rear seats, the remaining women took the middle layer, and finally, I had permission to proceed.

Four hours in, Anaya, a salaried professional and married to my fellow passenger, Shaan, who could not let a single song play out, had a problem that she wanted to discuss with the others in the car.

After she married Shaan, Anaya moved in with him and his parents. The in-laws are great to live with, she told us. Her meals are taken care of, her laundry too. Tiffin reaches her office in time for lunch. And while she is at work, her mother-in-law gets her room cleaned. She and her husband return from a day’s work to ready meals and a spotless room.

This made me wonder if her problem was that she lived in the suite of a commercial airliner. But her problem related to household expenses. She claimed her in-laws did not give her enough *ghar kharch* (household allowance).

As she poured this out, others in the car made strong sounds of support. Her friends appeared to be going through a similar problem. While one of them did not get enough money from her in-laws, another said her in-laws kept a check on how much and where she spent this money.

I put in a polite enquiry to Anaya. I wondered why she took an allowance from her in-laws in the first place, when both she and her husband earned decent wages.

“It is a joint family,” she said. “How else are you supposed to run the house?”

“From the money, you earn …” I trailed off, from fear mainly.

“I was asking for expenses for the house.”

“And that should come from the in-laws?” I asked.

“Of course!” A chorus rings.

I took a pause. I considered my options. Three hours to destination. Four, if we stopped for a meal. Could I handle that length of uncomfortable silence?

“I’m changing this one,” Shaan announced and gave us a noisier ambience.

“You understand it’s not your money,” I said.

“We live with them,” Anaya said. “My mother still gets an allowance.”

“But it is their house. Shouldn’t you be the one paying rent to them?” I said.

When I asked how she would run her house if she lived on her own, she said that that would be different. “I would like to live in a house of my own. My in-laws are great. And who wouldn’t love a house of their own?” she said. “But if we moved out, people in the community will talk about how our family does not get along. So, we have to live together.”

Shaan changed the song and turned to me. “Apparently, we are living together to avoid gossip doing the rounds,” he said. “Ironic, since if we really don’t get along and we must move out, we won’t care about what people think then.”

“What does your mother do?” I asked Anaya.

“A house wife. Why?”

“And what did she want to be growing up?”

“A designer, I think,” she said.

“And what happened?”

“Her father got her married at nineteen,” she said. “What’s your point?”

I didn’t have one, I said. I needed an answer. Had I not asked the question, her statement would have gnawed at me for days. But now, I had my answer.

Anaya and her friends have inherited specific ways and values from the generation before them. We all have. But I wondered if we paused to examine whether it fits anymore. I assumed Anaya’s mother would have picked the independence of making her choices, whether to work or not, over a monthly allowance. That allowance, which is a symbol of financial dependence for a woman who was not allowed to work, has become for her daughter an entitlement. I suppose, growing up, Anaya had seen her mother getting this allowance, and she believed she must live the same way. And before she inherited the money, she has inherited an idea. But is it valid any longer?

How to inherit an idea

In 1908, the Indian freedom movement was in tatters. Bengal partitioned, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was sentenced to six years in prison and the British ruled with no end in sight.

During this period, Tarak Nath, a freedom fighter, sent two letters to Leo Tolstoy, the Russian author, asking him to show support for India’s independence from British rule.

In response, Tolstoy wrote back *A letter to Hindu,* which Tarak Nath published in his paper called *Free Hindustan*.

The paper landed on the table of a young lawyer in South Africa, called Mohandas K. Gandhi, who was beginning his career as an activist. The letter stated: “*A war of love can overthrow the British empire. Non-violent application in the form of protests, strikes and peaceful resistance is the only alternative to violent revolution*.”

Guess who liked that idea? The query of one man, the opinion of another, inherited by a third. It moved millions in their fight for freedom.

How NOT to inherit an idea: The cover story

We had made it to the wedding just in time. The ceremony was a family affair. After back and forth, and back and forth, the ring ceremony reached its peak. With a loud cheer, both sides of the family came together. Quickly, the excitement in the room washed away as we found ourselves trying to get the attention of the flying waiters. Finger food on magic carpets, it appeared.

But, no one seemed more hassled than the bride's mother. The groom's mother was guiding her through quick introductions with the groom's side of the family, and to each, the bride's mother handed a designer envelope – known as a *cover*.

A *cover* is a sum of money given as a gift from the bride's family to members of the groom's family. This cover is more than just a tradition. It is a protocol.

The amount should be indivisible by 100, i.e. 101, 1001, 1101, 1110. We invented the binary system. We just used it wrong. Also, the amount of money depends on the member's relationship with the groom. Covers are such a big part of Indian life that people maintain notebooks of who gave them what and when, so they can give back a similar amount. It goes beyond generations and it offends people if someone messes up the protocol. I have seen covers packed so tight, they are no longer envelopes, but bricks. And no matter how a cover diagram flows, like drunks at a casino, the bride's side of the family always ends up losing money.

Just as we got to the appetisers, the groom's mother and the bride's mother blocked our way. And as we watched the kebabs sail away, the bride's mother handed my wife and I an envelope each. She thanked us for attending the wedding. And then, they left in search of others. At this moment, my wife and I exchanged a glance with a strange set of realisations. One: that room service was the answer to our hunger. And two: that something was not right about the envelopes we held.

Growing up, we got these covers all the time, and we never thought much of them. At my sister's *vidai*, for instance, I got a cover that contained the most amount of money I had held in my life. And this put me in a strange dilemma. Tears were rolling out of my eyes, my cousins consoling me, but my mind was running wild with what I could do with this money.

But in the present, it was a moment where we thought about why this was a practice at weddings. The groom's side being gifted money for attending a wedding was an incentive, sure, but unethical.

And we decided, we would say no. But quickly, the question became how to say no. An Indian wedding is much like deep sea diving in dangerous waters. If you are careless, the culture sharks will tear through your bones. My wife told me to be a man.

"Not today, darling," I said.

And then, we came up with a less confrontational idea. When we went to congratulate the bride and the groom, we handed the bride the covers her mother had given to us. And seeing how their jaws were hurting from smiling at five hundred guests, we kept it short. Soon, the next set of guests had moved in and we strolled out of view. In all, it seemed quite the operation. And we celebrated our petite rebellion, with room service that took two staffers to carry.

The following morning, I got a call from groom's mother.

"Who returns money?" she said. "What are you – Stupid?"

It took me time to gather the reason behind such beaming sentiments. "It is not fair on them. They're paying for so much …"

"Who returns money?!" she interrupted. "The bride's mother thinks you returned the cover because you're offended it wasn't a larger amount."

I mime a '*fuck*', but let out a 'God!'

"Why would I do that?" I said.

"Why do you do anything? This is your mess. I'm sending you her number. Call her and apologise."

"Apologise?"

"Well, yes. If you're not offended, then she is. And don't ever say no to money again. It is a sin."

Following this sermon for the greedy, I put down the phone. And I called the bride's mother to explain the idea behind returning the cover.

“You can’t question a custom. It is a custom. A custom,” she said. “It is customary to take cover.”

“I did,” I said, having learnt my word of the day.

“And you returned it to my daughter,” she said. “I am insulted.”

Right, so not offended then. “I am sorry,” I said.

“Why don’t you just take it? You are causing so many headaches, son. You are like a heatwave.”

I agreed.

The wedding reception went on as planned. We received the cover, which we had earlier returned. And to make sure everyone knew we had taken back the cover, the bride’s mother called my wife and me on stage before all the guests and handed us a cover each. And she also announced that she had increased the amount in the envelopes, so we felt better about taking it. The culture sharks were relishing our misery.

Once the wedding was over, during goodbyes, I met the mother of the bride.

“Say I changed the envelope of the cover,” I said, “and then I gave it back to the bride. Would you be offended?”

“What is wrong with you? Why do you ask the questions you do, son?”

“I should know what to do at the next one.”

“And why should you?”

“It’s not right. That’s all.”

She took a moment. “There’s a lot not right. But, best just to go along.”

I hesitated. “Plato said a lot of great things. Arguably, the greatest of thinkers. But he also compared women to children. What would this world be if the ones after him thought – best just to go along. We are so hung up on doing things the old way. We forget to question if the old ways are even right.”

She nodded, “Yes, but you never say no to money.”

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As I drove back from the wedding, I wondered about the ideas we retain. The wedding had gone through without hiccups, apart from one. During the ceremony, while the bride and the groom took their spot around the fireplace, there was an obvious problem. Both sides of the family had brought along their own pundits. It turned out, they had consulted on each detail of the wedding, including what colour saddle to put on the horse that would bring the groom to the ceremony, but they had assumed they were each in charge of bringing the pundit. And before their guests, neither one was willing to back away. While the bride's family believed it was their right to marry their daughter according to the customs of their ancestors, the groom's family thought their traditions were better suited for the wedding.

The guests began to pay attention when the discussion had turned into an argument. And then, each one wanted a say in it — people who intervened were soon arguing about ethics and interpreting scriptures. Soon, the wedding was at risk of being called off. Then, someone suggested to have both gurus on the mandap and each can take turns to chant.

The families agreed. They sent the guests back to their seats. And they unleashed their pundits on the couple, who now had to sit through double the length of a traditional ceremony. The groom was grumpy, the bride's make-up was cake and the guests continued their arguments about what the scriptures commanded.

But in all this, no one appeared to ask – why is it important to do things a certain way and no other? Why is it important to stick to the guidelines of traditions? What do hearts and genitals have to do with forefathers?

At what point is a generation free? Free to re-examine their way of life. Open to embrace tradition, but discard what makes us miserable. And does this thought matter in a place where traditions are biased, where the seldom understood is followed like a flight path, where to question is fast becoming treason, where what has been going on for ages carries more merit than examining what must stop now, and where to go along is the norm but to pause and ponder is a problem.

And I wondered, if in the end, what hurts us most is not what we inherit, but what we fail to shrug off.

We fought

for freedom.

Whose freedom?

The heterosexual man?

The religious heterosexual man?

The religious homophobic chauvinistic man?

The religious homophobic protectionist chauvinistic man?

The religious homophobic protectionist un-aborted chauvinistic man?

Whose freedom did we fight for?

SIX

Sex and sensibility

SEXUALITY

A woman from the 11th century stumbles into modern day India. Is she impressed by our roads, but appalled by our traffic sense? Can she sit through our no-smoking campaigns but watch us passive smoke fifty cars a day? Can she live with the horns, the congestion, the political suffocation? Maybe. But, can she stand what we have done to sex? *You messed up,* she says. *You people ruined sex!*

That is the feeling you get standing before the Khajuraho temples. There is more sexuality in those bricks than in the bones of our nation. It appears we have gone terribly wrong. Somewhere, we went stale.

Consider the following:

3rd Century – Kamasutra compiled. The art of sex taught to humans.

10th Century – The Khajuraho temples were built. A public building had erotic art. Sexuality was not confronting but appreciated. Temples of two religions stand side by side. Citizens followed more than one religion in the region. Religion was not in the way of sexuality.

13th to 19th Century – Dynasties changed hands. Of the 85 temples, 60 were destroyed. For 600 years, Khajuraho stood abandoned. A forest grew around it, protecting it from further destruction.

1838 A.D. – T.S. Burt, a British engineer, was told by his Indian counterparts that something of great value lay within that forest. He led a team to find the temples of Khajuraho.

But, by now, a lot has changed. We are no longer the people we used to be. We are a society veiled in religious restrictions. By now, we are boring.

How did we go from a secular, sexual and spiritual state, to a country where the most significant sex symbol is an item song navel?

As my friend and I stood before a temple in Khajuraho, our guide, a man named Aman, used a laser pointer as he talked about the erotic carving from the Kamasutra, which he said proudly, we wrote.

“Did we really?” I asked.

“Who else?”

“They lived here, sure,” I said. “But I doubt we can take credit for it.”

He smiled, then nodded. “I wonder that myself sometimes,” he said.

“What went wrong?” I pointed to the foursome on the wall, “How did we go from that to this?”

Around the park were women wrapped and veiled, while men gawked at the erotic art.

Aman had brought along his thermos of tea and invited my friend and me to join him. We sat on the grass and enjoyed a cup each. Aman spent his days taking tourists through the historical tour of Khajuraho. In the twelve years that he had been doing this, Aman had often thought about our question, he said.

“Where did we go wrong …?” He verbalised his thoughts as he sipped his tea. “When the Englishman stumbled upon this in the 19th century, back in Britain, homosexuality still carried a death penalty. Here, 11th century carvings show them it was a part of our society. No taboo here, this was a public structure,” he said. “The English considered it impolite to talk about sex.”

“I suppose they stared at this in silence.”

Aman smiled. He told us his father was a guide who spent his days speaking with tourists from around the world. Aman would come to the temples after school and watch his father explain these carvings on the temple walls.

“He spoke about sexuality, sex, spirituality. But at home, my mother had to cover her face,” he said. “And that’s where we went wrong. The proof of

sanity is before us …" he pointed at the walls of Khajuraho. "But we can't see the truth."

Our understanding of sexuality seventeen hundred years ago was better. What a blunder! From getting a formal education in the art of sex, we have gone to a society that goes to great lengths to keep men and women apart. Men and men apart. And women and women apart. We have gone from erotic art on the walls of a temple to cheap suggestive remarks in pop culture. Now, it seems sexuality is like high treason, hidden in curtains and whispers.

Lord! Where do I put it?

Arranged marriage is as much a sport as cricket. Find a broker, meet in a hotel, discuss spend and statistics, and for the right price, on an auspicious day, a man will throw in the towel.

While Tanmay sat with a woman in a restaurant, the woman's brother, Pranay, and I waited at the bar. Tanmay appeared nervous. From his expression, it seemed like she might be holding a gun to his crotch. And Pranay's frequent looks in their direction did not help, since for some reason, Tanmay felt obliged to nod and smile with each glance. Pranay was willing to give his sister the space she needed, but he was reluctant to let her out of his sight. It was as if, if Tanmay offended her, Pranay could trap him with his bar stool. And pre-empting this, Tanmay gave me the job to keep Pranay occupied. But it was turning out to be a much harder job than I had imagined.

"What's your take on arranged marriages?" I asked Pranay.

"I don't have one," he answered, his eyes on the couple. "Sometimes unexpected, mostly excruciating."

"Sounds like a take to me," I said.

He delivered a rare smile. "I went through a few myself. My wife was arranged," he said. "What about you? Are you looking at girls?"

"No, stopped looking at girls a long time ago," I said. "But at women, I do. Yes"

"So, you prefer love marriages?"

“Prefer just the one.”

“Just make sure you have at least two children,” he said. “More if you can.”

“Okay …”

“Soon there won’t be enough of us. And more of them,” he said.

“More of whom?” I asked.

“You know what I am talking about,” he said, looking in my general direction. “They are having six, seven, eight children. You are having none. Soon, they will dominate and you will be destroyed.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think we were preparing for war,” I said.

He turned his body towards me. “Take my advice. Have two or more.”

I sighed. “Well, you don’t need to get married for that. You can just have kids,” I said.

And finally, I had his attention. “Not in our religion.”

“Is it religion? I thought it was so that there aren’t unplanned pregnancies?” I said. “Now you have contraceptives and methods … ”

“How can you think it’s okay to have sex before marriage? I never had sex before marriage.”

“Oh, you missed out, sir.” I smiled, but I quickly wrapped it up. “I have never understood, though, is marriage a legal thing or a religious affair?”

“Both,” he said.

“So, God consulted with lawmakers?” I asked.

He paused. “It is a holy union,” he said.

“With legal ramifications,” I argued.

“I hope you die in a car crash tonight,” he said, and left with his sister.

In the end, Tanmay’s fears of saying something offensive to his date were unfounded.

But this made me wonder if the reason we have wrapped sex and sexuality in religion is that we didn't know where to put it. By itself, it appears to us confronting, so we must attach it to something else. Cuff it to rituals, chain it to reproduction and gag it to God. Can we live without penalising, legalising, and demonising sex?

The family outing

The Khanna family woke up to a new reality. Each participant walked out of their rooms, unsure of what to expect. They sat around their breakfast table, poured their cups of tea and sipped in silence. There was Mother Khanna. Father Khanna. Sister Khanna. And Pulkit Khanna, the man who had taken the family out for dinner the night before.

It had started well. They held their menus before their faces and gave their order as a family. A paneer dish, black dal and *rotis* for everyone. And they told the waiter to make it spicy. Pulkit had taken great care to pick the restaurant his father liked, set a time his mother preferred and to get his sister to be on his side – he had been dropping her to work for a week. It was a well-laid plan. For the Khanna parents, their kids joined the workforce two years ago, but this was the first time any one of them had offered to take them out for dinner.

"To what do we owe this honour?" Pulkit's father asked.

"I can't take my parents out for dinner?"

"We were starting to think so," the mother said.

Pulkit laughed. And instantly, his sister knew something was amiss.

"Actually, there is something I have been meaning to tell you," Pulkit said.

"Knew it!" his sister said, "Mum is not funny."

"What is it, son?" his father said. "Is it your job?"

"No. Job's fine."

"What is it? You have us worried now," his mother said. "Is it bad? Because if it is bad, Pulkit, we should eat first," Sister said.

"You know Sharad?" Pulkit asked.

“Which one is he?” Father looked at his wife.

“The engineer. He used to work on a boat,” she said.

“It was a ship, Mum,” Pulkit said.

“Right!” his father nodded. “Decent boy.”

“Yes, he is,” Pulkit said. “And I am seeing him.”

His sister held her smile as she turned to her parents. Father stared at Pulkit with a blank look. Mother turned around. “Where do you see him?”

So, the Khanna family woke up to a new reality. They had said nothing to each other since then. And in Pulkit’s head, this was the best result. His mother came out of her room with a hand on her head. It was her, *I am not having a good day* look. Pulkit and his father had exchanged a brief glance, but since then his father kept his eyes at the newspaper, and he appeared to be reading a single word repeatedly.

“Can we talk about Pulkit?” his sister said. “He has not done anything wrong.”

Pulkit looked at her. She was the last source of support for him. But she had come through. He smiled at her.

“No, he has not done anything wrong. Until yesterday,” the father said, as he folded the newspaper and kept it on the table. “But today, he will do something wrong.”

As I said, the Khanna family had woken up to a new reality. The day, 12 December 2013. A day after Pulkit decided to come out to his family, the courts recriminalised homosexuality. Five years later, they decriminalised it. Pulkit fears the next change of mind.

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We are a country sporting a shaky stance on sexuality. First, we have no law on homosexuality. We don’t see the need to evaluate a human being’s sexual preferences by the strong arm of the law. Then the British put it through religious text. And, “Negative!” they declare. “Against how He intended it,” they say.

And their confidence makes the rest of us nervous. How could the rest of us not know, we think? And we nod, so we don't look stupid. "We have the same results. We checked."

And for over a century, we hold this righteous frown. Until logic kicks in and we desire to change. So, in 2009, we decriminalise homosexuality. But four years later, we recriminalise it. People walking out of closets rush back inside. "If you are not inside a closet, we will put you in prison," said the lawmakers.

And so, we pretend to be a billion heterosexuals. And then, we legalise gay sex. But we need time to process gay marriage laws.

Why must a person wait for a state to make up its mind on an issue that is personal? Absurd, that the most confused about sexuality is a law.

While most of the world is going through sexual liberation, we are stuck in what seems to be the great Indian sexual depression. Wonder about the 11th century days of Khajuraho and look at us now. Have we taken a steep dive into a bottomless pool of religious restrictions? From the uninhibited art on public structures to now frowning upon premarital sex.

One explanation might be the average life of a person in positions of power. In the 11th century, if you lived to be forty, it was a good life. This meant the rulers of this world were mostly young men and women. They were unafraid and progressive about sex and sexuality. Today, our lawmakers are not only past their sexual prime, but the only time they like to encounter the word 'sex' is on a voter database. That, or in bills and acts (i.e. *sexon* 26).

We forget that sexuality has more to do with who you are; what you like, who you like, the kind of person you are attracted to, things you prefer in the bedroom, things you prefer outside the bedroom. It is about what excites you. A type or spectrum. Sexuality is an expression of you. The difference between sex and sexuality is simple. Sex takes two, sexuality takes one. Masturbation also takes one, but that is a sexual act.

Often, I find people in power (the moral police) don't understand the terms related to sex. And their influence over society can be seen by the fact that sexual problems in our country are known as *gupt rog* (hidden diseases). They go to such lengths to not talk about it, it is only natural to

assume that they are unable to grasp this concept. How about an explanation, in terms they understand?

A businessman and a politician enter a room.

Seduction: the businessman with a briefcase. You think there might be cash in it, but you are not sure. Exciting!

Sex: the act of taking money from the briefcase and stuffing your pocket.

Sexuality: how you like your money. In a briefcase, a bag, a pouch or a plastic bag.

Homosexuality: you like the briefcase.

Heterosexuality: you like your money in a plastic bag, but the government just called a ban on those.

A politician’s survival kit:

Please the majority, comfort the minority, keep the rich in the loop and the poor disillusioned.

SEVEN

The divides that unite us

POLITICS & RELIGION

Things we should not mix, we put together repeatedly and with disastrous results. Attempting to read a menu during a conversation. Trying to breathe while drinking water. Travelling, with baggage. Talking about the weather in the hope that it might lead to a more interesting topic. And the same is true, in my opinion, about politics and religion. The only thing common between the two is how much is written about them and how little is understood, apart from the level of detail in their public structures.

The politics of religion riles us up and piles up. But I find it amazing how well it works. Especially when you weigh our deep distrust of politicians against the number of riots they have been able to successfully inaugurate. Over the years, political parties have too often used rioting to gain foothold in a state. If a state does not exist, they first create it, and then declare the killing open. Which makes me wonder, if it is that easy to exploit a faith.

First, let's talk about religion. Not A religion, for it often irks people, but about all religions. Irk them all, I say. And say there is a group of people, who believes in all religions. All the Gods. The popular ones. The not so popular. The infamous and the debatable. They even made up some more. Why stop now, they say. We can call them *Allers*. So, if religion is belief with devotion, an *Aller* is the most devoted believer out there. And perfect for our discourse.

Now, as *Allers* go through their annual plan of devotion, they discover that their relationship with God is a one-way conversation. For months, they are trying to communicate, in every language, pitch and the direction they can, but the Gods do not answer, not in words anyway. Rude? Sure. But, consistent across the population of Gods. And *Allers* are kept guessing if the Gods can hear them. *Are the Gods listening? Allers* ask. *They must be. But what if they are not? How do we get through?*

So, like passengers with nothing to do, they try and start a conversation; they shout, chant, pray and dance; they sing in a choir, sway in a crowd, go hungry for hours – nothing from up there. Do more, they declare; they lie down, on the ground, roll around; light a fire, bare-footed, proper hooded, right attire; they marry a tree, slay a goat and hold a leaf; try a shave, go unshaved, eyes closed, head on grave – it does not do the job. So, time to take it up a notch; they worship preachers, teachers, mythic creatures, install speakers; they eat by sunset, bathe by sunrise; go miles, overseas, mountain hikes; they circumcise, pay fines; unsure, they draw lines; men are fine, women behind, visiting hours well-defined, period worship not allowed; girls, headgear, quiet now – no reply. Rituals might we try; inhale, exhale, meditate, alternate, hocus pocus, focus, on the locus; more, and more down the rabbit hole; eat only this, not that, not today, not now; with this hand, and this way; they reason it out, they must scream and shout; *God do you hear us now?*

But it is hardly enough. How much might be enough? What else can they do? How loud can they be? On a scale of a mute to a Punjabi. Logically, if God can hear us from earth, then a whisper can convey the same as a scream. But how much does logic guide a believer? What guides a believer, anyway?

1. Bell, bell, clap

In the year 1995, I was three years into a twelve-year sentence at a boarding school in Dehradun. Widespread protests had forced the city shut. Something about people demanding a separate state for themselves, I wasn't quite sure. I was the height of a tree stump and oblivious to the intricacies of geopolitics. Although, I remain unsure, why a river must belong to *one* state and land to a group of people and no other. Remind me, did we fight for our freedom so only a select few can drink from a body of water?

They told us people were burning down cars and buses. Didn't worry me. I owned neither a car nor a bus. Besides, I had other reasons to be upset. While most schools in the valley had called holidays during the curfew, ours remained open. Since we were a boarding school and most of our teachers lived on campus, our principal thought if we operated at a lower decibel, we might be able to get away with it.

Before the crisis, our normal day looked something like this; at 5 am, one of those massive bells, big as a horse's head, rang through the campus. By 5:30 am, we were on the field for physical training. We went from bed-wetting and nightmares to sit-ups and drills. Then, flavoured milk with four biscuits. And when the bell sounded again, we had a half hour to get ready and make it to class on the other side of the campus.

Two bells, five minutes apart, at the start of each lesson. It gave us enough time to switch classrooms. Bells and then our second class. Bells and breakfast. Bells, assembly. Bells, class. Bells, class. Bells, class. Lunch between a set of bells. Bells between classes. Bells, class. Bells, dorm. Whistles on the field. But a bell to end play time. A bell to switch off the shower. Bells, for dinner. Bells and pencils up. Bells to put them down. Bells and lights off. During a single boarding school day, we went through fifty-seven bells shifting between tasks. This was our life. Essentially, we were Swiss cows.

But then, the protests began to spread and our principal announced that for a fortnight there would be no bells. I turned to my friend with a victory fist. I thought no bells meant no schedule. But, the following morning,

when flat smack jolted me out of my sleep, I realised they had just swapped the horse’s head of a bell for a set of claps.

Now, we had to get used to the fifty sets of claps. And I soon found out, compared to bells, claps were painful. A large distant bell had the echo of a valley. You heard a bell, a clap from another set of hands was like a knock on your eardrum. Abrupt and sudden. If you were unprepared, a clap could make you jump and turn a nightmare into a leak. I knew, on the outside, the state was burning, but I just wished we could go back to the bells. And then, two days before we were to resume normal life, our principal announced that he was extending the claps by a month. Long gone was the victory fist. Darker times lay ahead.

And all these years later, other than hating the sound of applause or a birthday celebration, the argument about religion and politics reminds me of this comparison between bells and claps.

Swear by a religion or swear without, breathe an ideology or snort a concept, undeniably we live by a code. Tiny invisible bells guiding us. Religion is one such horse’s head of a bell. Those who hear it, live by it. Some tolerate it. Others just go along. It is comfortable for some and a chore for others. But it is peaceful.

Now, add to religion a politician and you get claps. Confronting, irregular and shrill, claps force us to react. Leaving us angry and fuming. And while we wish to go back to a life with bells, we are unsure of what about claps troubles us in the first place.

LIFE WITH BELLS (religion)	**LIFE WITH CLAPS (politics + religion)**
Your God. My God.	Your God vs. My God.
Your book. My book.	Your book vs. My book.
Your truth. My truth.	Your Truth vs. My truth.

2. Living with claps

Over the next month, things on the outside appeared to get worse. We couldn’t be sure, because although kids make excellent eavesdroppers, they are unreliable spies. This is mainly because they tend to exaggerate for effect. One story that came through our human bugs included protestors tying a police officer to a kite and flying him across the valley.

It was a month of fake news. Cremated cars. Makeshift dormitory classrooms. And no sports. “We are slaves to the clap,” I told my teacher. This was before I knew a clap was also a sexually transmitted disease. “Give them the state, give them my food. Just give me back my bells.”

To me, the only advantage of a new state was you could now trick the smartest boy in class with the question – “How many states in our country?” I had the pleasure of doing this on five occasions. Delhi, Goa, Uttaranchal, Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh.

While we were learning to live through days that were one long slow applause, the nights were worse. To get sleep in a dormitory of a hundred kids was an uphill task for a range of reasons. It was a bedding arrangement for most on edge. You got night screams, sleep-talkers, small bladders, weepers, howlers, coughers, sneezers, mouth-breathers and some who fell from their bed in their sleep. But now, you had kids snapping awake an entire colony with a single clap. I was not quite sure when it started, but once it did, it became a norm. Wake up in the middle of the night to take a leak or with a leak done, once you’re back in bed, clap and jerk to life a group of kids. Their hair in the air, eyebrows everywhere.

Sometimes, I wondered why we did what we did. Put our limp hands together and watched the rest lose sleep. Payback? Yes. Funny? Sure. But, how did we know a clap would work? We were kids with a raging bed-wetting problem, how did we know the effect it would have? It was simple. We knew what made us move.

As the crisis went on, we were struggling to get any exercise or sleep. Eventually, some of the bigger kids in class held a meeting. They warned the night clappers and decided on a night patrol. A half-hour rolling watch.

It was a good plan, which tanked on its opening night. The kids meant to police couldn’t stay awake and woke up from a clap along with the rest. And this went on for a few days. We tried, we failed and we woke up with a jolt. One night, as I lay in bed with my eyes open, I turned to my neighbour.

“Don’t they want people to leave the city?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Why else would they burn down cars?”

“They want a new state,” he said.

“But, why cars?”

“Why not?”

“No, I’m asking why?”

“But why not?”

The art of conversation was not for sleep deprived children. We hit a wall so quickly into the conversation, I thought it was best to stare into the dark than talk.

The following morning, during a class in our dormitory, a panicked staff member rushed inside. He whispered to our teacher and ran out. The teacher, Mr Chatterjee, told us to get into the bathroom and stay quiet. He closed the door from the outside and bolted it shut.

We stood in the dark. Whispers all around. Then, shushes all around. I shushed someone, someone else shushed me for shushing and so on. Then someone began to take a leak and now everyone wanted to go. Soon, we were a group of standing marchers. Then, sounds began to come through. Loud, unruly sounds. A window shattered. A chair thrashed against the wall. We couldn’t be sure it was a chair, but it sounded more like a chair than Mr Chatterjee. Someone demanded answers, bully-like. Mr Chatterjee was timid in his reply. He said how could they send the children home when there was violence on the road. The men ordered him to stop any classes. We heard a couple of claps and then the men left. Minutes later, a red-faced Mr Chatterjee let us out and asked us to return to our beds and read in silence.

“Did you clap, sir?” I asked.

“What?”

“I heard a clap.”

“They did,” Mr Chatterjee said. “They showed me the one-handed clap.”

“Can you show me too?” I asked.

“I’m sure someday someone will,” he said, “If you ask the right questions, someday, someone will.”

“Why are they burning down cars, sir?” I asked.

He paused, to relax his jaw. “I suppose, that is what they want you to see,” he said. “Distraction is an opportunity.”

***

DISTRACTION AS AN OPPORTUNITY

1. Pick the right date

14 March 2018 – 10 am: I realised it was time for a haircut. So, I returned to the barber who skimmed me right the last time. But halfway through I realised that he had gone too short and he noticed that I had been here before. Annoyed, I stared at my reflection, and then I looked away because you can stare at yourself for only so long before it starts to get uncomfortable. My eyes stopped at the wall-mounted television visible in the mirror. Another news channel obsessed over the Ayodhya verdict that was due later the same day. Extra security across the state. On the streets, burning dummies burned other dummies. Politicians protested outside the parliament.

2:30 pm – I met my wife at a café. She agreed that my haircut was highlighting all the wrong features of my face. I told her something else was troubling me.

“Face looks too long?” she said.

“What? No,” I answered.

I pointed to the television on the café wall, at the politicians protesting outside parliament. People who had about a 10 per cent attendance in parliament had taken the effort to first show up, and then step back out. This went against habit, considering that on numerous occasions they had stayed inside to nap, to shout, to chant slogans and even to exchange blows. These are people who didn’t use the words, *let’s take this outside*.

“Then why today, are they protesting outside?” I asked.

My wife suggested I look into it and also look for a new barber.

But while no answer came to me, another question occurred to me. If they are outside, hogging microphones – what was happening inside?

2. Sow the seeds early

The year was 2010. Big year for frauds. Commonwealth games. Some winners got medals, others got out on bail. The 2G spectrum swindle. The guilty went scot-free. But this year, it was also the perfect time to sow the seeds of one of the greatest magic tricks of all time.

One fine day, all political parties chorused an exact sentiment. That the NGOs were funded by ‘foreign elements’. And to stop this, they passed an act called the *Foreign Contribution Regulation Act*. They included political parties to the act. Put themselves through the regulation, so activists couldn’t cry foul. This was out of character. And therefore suspicious. But look closer, and a motive appears.

3. Shadow the shady

The *Foreign Contribution Regulation Act* banned overseas funding for NGOs and politicians. This was especially odd, since the foreign funding act of 1976 already banned political parties from accepting overseas money. This was like rewriting *stealing is a crime* as *stealing is a crime now*. Were lawmakers unaware of the law? Then why include yourself in a regulation that is clearly redundant?

Could the reason have something to do with their plans to increase Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)? When multinational corporations would arrive in India, they would need land. And lots of it. And NGOs stood as obstacles in the way of politicians who wanted to stock up on farms and villages.

4. Harvesting season

NGOs: buried. Their domestic donors pressurised. Us: distracted. Communal violence surged. Canning, Muzaffarnagar, Malda. That cricket league, that shouting newsreader, that religious issue that did not matter. So, when a politician eyed a farm or a village to industrialise, no one helped the weak fight for their rights. For business with political ties, this was a one-of-a-kind feeding frenzy.

With land usurped, villages relocated, the poor displaced – FDI increased. Retail and construction, the two industries with maximum use of land, got 100 per cent FDI.

Multi-nationals arrived. Struck billions of dollars of land deals. But it appeared that they deposited only token money into Indian banks and the lion’s share into overseas accounts. Consider this: According to estimates in 2010, off-shore accounts of Indian politicians and power brokers had about $ 500 billion USD. In the year 2018, this estimate grew to about $ 1500 billion USD.

This is about ₹ 103635000000000 or over a hundred trillion rupees. This money, if divided between 1.35 billion citizens, would result in each getting around ₹ 1,00,000 or a hundred thousand rupees.

5. Send out the Moneyed

Between 2016 and 2018, India saw the largest migration of money in the history of the world. Over 8,000 multimillionaires migrated overseas. Most of them had the reputation of being political donors and power brokers. It was as though they woke up one morning and they were all given the same direction.

And one must wonder why? Well, making money and depositing it in banks overseas was only half the magic trick. This was like buying a car but leaving it at the dealership. To truly fool the crowd, you must bring it back.

6. So now, for our final trick

14 March 2018. The day of my haircut. Commercial news focused on the Ayodhya verdict. While politicians and newsreaders distracted the country, let us look past the burning car. Look inside.

Inside, they introduced the finance bill. Present were exactly the number of heads needed to pass this bill.

Among the 21 amendments to the bill, tucked in Section 236 was a statement that altered everything about Indian politics. Section 236 exempted political parties from restrictions set in 2010. But while the whole country was awaiting the verdict, and politicians were making sure the cameras faced them, the ones inside were changing a key date – “26 September 2010” to “5 August 1976”.

This allowed political parties to accept foreign funding without declaring the donor. Moreover, this bill now exempted political parties from any investigation of foreign funding since 1976. Which is to say, 40 years of money laundering was now suddenly legal. And this bill was passed without a single line of debate.

Moreover, this also helped the national parties escape the 2014 Delhi high court judgement that held them guilty of violating the Foreign Contribution Act.

Remember the multi-millionaires who left the country – they have access to tax havens and now will pour in the funds acquired from land sales and scams for 70 years. Illegal was now legitimate. And stashed funds can come pouring into political accounts, uncapped and anonymous, legally and tax-free.

So, it turns out, while they were allegedly guilty of the exact thing they accused NGOs of doing, they made sure they re-wrote the law so their crime was no longer a crime. And this, they did together. Political parties across the spectrum, across religions, came together and brought back black money like they promised. Except, now it is white and in their bank accounts.

But you keep voting on religion …

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Let me put it like this: A political party established to help workers and farmers had a new member. A great orator, who quickly climbed the ranks. He reinforced their idea of nationalism, began a propaganda to favour those who ‘belonged’ to the country and denied those that did not. He recruited people into a ‘moral police’. He instructed them to disrupt meetings of rival political parties, to protest on the streets and to bully those who didn’t support their leader. The leader, the orator, gave hate speeches, inciting violence against a sect of society. His moral police obliged. They even destroyed certain holy places. Soon, the threshold of nationalism went from helping workers and farmers to making sure that only one way of life existed in the country.

In a matter of three years, the membership of this tribe increased five-fold. Soon, they became the second largest party in the country. Once they even beat up rival politicians inside the parliament and thrashed people on the streets just to make a statement. The moral police incited riots, protests, even street shootings. The leader created panic, against an impending attack on the country and used it to step into power.

This political party was the National Socialist Workers’ Party, also referred to as National Socialist, but better known as the Nazi Party. And their leader was Adolf Hitler.

He went on to reduce the basic rights of German citizens. Imprisoning those who spoke against the Nazi propaganda. Locking up homosexuals, rebels, writers, anyone he classified as dangerous. Later, he declared war on Poland and committed some of the greatest atrocities known to man during the Second World War.

Among the bestselling cautionary tales, the one with Hitler is perhaps the most widely sold. But what is most ignored about this story is what I find fascinating.

Nazis were a product of democracy; people forget.

Even on mute, the news is too loud.

EIGHT

Tell us whom to hate, and why

NEWS MACHINE

Since the news is never good, it amazes me that people insist on taking it in so early in the morning. Especially when you consider the advantage of getting your daily news with dinner. Defeated by the day. Knocked back by the world. But at least you weren't on that bus that flew off the bridge. But then, if you are planning to take a bus, I strongly recommend getting your news that morning.

The year was 2008. Melbourne. A couch-sized apartment. On the phone, a woman's panic-stricken voice. "Can you hear?" she asked, and appeared to hold the phone to a chorus of angry men.

With barely enough strength to lift my eyelids, I now pieced together that the phone was facing a television playing the news. And that this was in fact, not a woman's panic-stricken voice, but the panic-stricken voice of my mother.

"Hear what, Mum?" I asked, as I tried to figure out how it was that I had woken up with one hand inside a packet of chips, holding onto a single chip, when my tongue tasted of tomatoes. *When did I eat a tomato?*

"They are attacking Indians over there," she said.

"Who is, where? What are you talking about?" I stumbled through my questions, unsure if I had heard right. "Where did you hear this?"

"On every news channel. For two days, this is the only news," she said. "Listen to me. Don't step outside. We're sending you a ticket, go to the airport."

"Afraid I can follow only one of those instructions," I said. "Also, why did you wait two days to call?"

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes, Mother, I am perfectly fine,” I said, wiping my chip-salted fingers against my shirt. And as I put the phone down, I realised that I had finally acquired the skills to fake normalcy.

Six months ago, in the deep end of the 2008 financial crisis, I had put on my graduation robe and square hat with the sinking realisation that no one in the world was hiring. Banks had orchestrated a suicide attack on the world economy, but the bank that had sanctioned my education loan appeared to be thriving. This, proven by their generous spend on stamps, just to keep me in the loop about their intentions to recover their money from my lower intestines.

Soon, while I worked early mornings at a newsstand in the city and nights answering phones for people wanting to dispute gas bills in their sleep, I was unsure if I was living through days and nights or between shifts and sulks. But I was convinced that I was living the exact opposite of whatever a university brochure promised.

Back to the present: My mother’s call had left me confused. Neither had I come across such a piece of news at my morning job, where newspapers surrounded me, nor had I experienced this on the 2 am tram ride home. And yet somehow, this was headline news on my parents’ television. The same TV with whom my mother was forcing me to have a telephonic conversation.

And while this news was oddly unsettling, I feared the days to come were about to get stranger.

Diary of a news victim

The morning after: I woke up to a hysteria among the population of Indians in Melbourne. I assumed they had all spoken to their families while wondering when they had consumed a tomato. Also worried was anyone who looked like us. A fellow from Dhaka was particularly panicked.

“You can’t expect an attacker to tell the difference. The first man killed in retaliation to 9/11 was a Sikh walking down a street,” he said.

“So, we should take a cab then,” I said, getting off the sidewalk.

At the newsstand, I searched for any news that validated the claims of my mother. On page 7 of a local newspaper, below an advertisement for a top-loading washing machine, was a story about an Indian student who got mugged returning home after a late-night shift. Stolen items included a watch, a gold chain and a phone with a low battery. The assailant was unknown and I assumed, having to use a pay-phone. The article concluded by stating that the investigations were ongoing. On the other hand, the Indian news channel websites offered a different reality. They declared this a *racially motivated attack on Indian students living in Australia*.

The lopsided news intrigued me and I decided to follow this closely.

Two nights in: The 2 am tram ride home was still quite comfortable since there were hardly any passengers. No panic of which the news channels speak. However, following the news was getting to me. I was uncomfortable.

A realisation: The world around me is as unsafe as the amount of news I can consume.

Five days in: I had run out of tomatoes. Meanwhile, more Indians have come forward to report muggings, violence and mean casual remarks within the last ten years. One Indian tourist claimed that he left his phone on an Adelaide train and no one had yet called him to return it.

Why don't I see before me what the news reports? Are they really attacking Indians over here? I wondered. *And who are 'they'*? *Are 'they', the same 'they', that one says when referring to something vague?* Like '*they*' who called this recession the banks' fault. *Are them that 'they'?*

The whole thing was upsetting.

Meanwhile in New Delhi, a regional political party protested outside the Australian embassy. They were demanding that no one should attack Indian students. This was especially surprising since this faction was notorious for beating up students who professed their love on Valentine's Day. Another political outfit demanded that no one should touch Indian students of just one religion. By this, I was, quite touched.

Day of the Melbourne protest: Indians in Melbourne gathered in great numbers. The plan appeared to be to walk down a city street, looking hurt. I

joined the march. I brought jam sandwiches, so I wouldn't have to spend on food. Since there were cameras and police, it was surprising that some of the protestors had turned up with cricket bats and hockey sticks. I was hoping they had a game later and this fell on their usual route. Then some showed up with baseball bats, so as not be stereotyped, but they were eventually suckered into playing cover drives in the air, so…

We shouted slogans. Sang old Bollywood songs. Even bought a coffee on the way. The protest appeared at risk of turning enjoyable. We assumed it would take longer to march across the main street of the city, but since the police had been kind enough to block all traffic, we had made excellent time. We reached the end prematurely and now, no one knew what to do next. Also, getting a consensus from a thousand people was near impossible, because Chinese whispers was a terrible game. The suggestion "let's walk back" came out the other end as "Kashmir is ours".

And this agitated the ones with bats and sticks. They started destroying billboards and tram stops. So, they were made to leave in cuffs. And their bats were now evidence.

Eventually, the crowd dispersed. My jam sandwiches were a huge hit. Everyone was talking about the guy who was eating a sandwich during the protest. I had to go home, prepare dinner and leave for my night shift. However, the protestors broke the arrival screen at the tram stop. Also, hundreds were waiting for a tram meant to carry 25 people. So, I decided to walk. But by the time I got home, I realised that I wouldn't be able to make it in time for my night shift.

"Don't bother coming in," said my boss.

"No, I'll see you tomorrow," I said.

"No, you won't," he assured me.

Ten days in: The crisis had deepened. Between losing half my paycheck and paying my entire education loan instalment, I was behind on my rent. My landlord said that I should find another place to stay.

"No, I'm quite comfortable here," I said.

"No, you are not," he confirmed.

Two weeks in: Our protest was making a difference. Diplomats decided to talk. I was glued to the news, and the couch at my friend's house. His wife hated watching me suffer and she wanted me to get back on my feet.

"I will never forget this," I said.

"You should," she insisted.

And so, while I looked for a new apartment and a job, something big happened. News channels in India demanded justice for Indian students. I assumed this referred to the ridiculous international call rates we had been paying to assure our families that we were okay. But it turned out that they were demanding answers from the ones in charge. The ones in charge said that for answers, first we must ask questions. And so, the Indian Prime Minister picked up his phone and conveyed his concern to his Australian counterpart.

I imagined the Australian Prime Minister putting down the phone and wondering why the man on the other end spoke in such a high-pitched voice. Experts turned on an Indian news channel for him. He took it in. "This is hard to watch," said the Prime Minister, referring to the endless looping video-clips and haunting soundtracks.

A month and two days in: Horror news stories about Australia continued. And while the ones on the ground were unaffected, plans were getting ruined. Indian student registrations were dropping. Tourist numbers plummeting. Also, Bollywood actors declared that they were boycotting Australia as a filming location. This was greatly appreciated by the general population, since actors like getting political only when it is convenient.

All of this demanded that they do something.

A month in: I was in my new apartment. It had one wall. A circular wall. And two doors for some reason. If the last apartment was couch-sized, this was a bucket. But I had just enough space to place a bed and a television set that plugs into the corridor. From the TV, I found out that the Australian government had invited a group of journalists from India to show them that Australia was a safe place.

"Finally!" I said, out loud.

"Shut up!" came a voice from the wall.

Forty-five days in: Indian journalists arrived. They enjoyed business-class travel, airport transfers in luxury cars and all-expenses-paid five-star accommodation. Great! Since this was almost identical to how Indian students lived in Australia, I wondered if in the morning, I should take my German-made chauffeur-driven tank to the newsstand.

Sixty days in: The negative reports stopped – an abrupt end. Indian journalists found postcard Australia to be a wonderful place. And on their return, they reported the great things about their experience. Coffee, muffins, room service, revolving restaurants, leather seats, full-recliners in the flight … in Australia, Indian students lived like kings. This trip became the single defining move that repaired relations between the two countries. Also, every time a train went past, my apartment trembled.

Sixty-two days in: I woke up to a call from my ex-landlord. I answered, again with the taste of tomato in my mouth. Fortunately, this time, I was holding a half-eaten tomato. He informed me that there was a letter addressed to me. I asked him to read it out. My bank has sent yet another, '*just so you know – we are here for you, and after you*' letter.

"Can you tell them I have moved?" I asked my landlord.

"I think it is better coming from you."

"No, it's fine. I'd like you to do it."

"No, you won't," he puts down the phone.

Citizen vs. the machine

What happened? I wondered. How did it come to this? How did *nothing* become such a huge crisis? And then how was a crisis this big, solved by something so farcical? Who was I supposed to blame? I assumed I got carried away. The question was, by whom?

And was I the only one? As I recalled, thousands were protesting. I doubt I was the only nut marching down the street with a jam sandwich. Students went to jail, their visas cancelled and some returned home without their degrees, others without their cricket bats. And many who applied to study at Australian universities changed their plans because of the news-generated fear. Families with children here paid vast sums of money to telecom

companies, even on discounted rates it was just ridiculous. Were we all to blame? And no one else?

To get to the bottom of this, I turned to an old friend who worked for a news network in the post-production department as an editor. Friends call her Lava. And since I called her Lava, I assumed I was a friend. Lava's editing suite was a dark room lit by twenty television monitors and a tiny red bulb.

Upon hearing my experience, she believed that the clip of eating a jam sandwich during a protest might fetch great air-time. "The good news was, the news did not deceive you," she told me. "An unknown attacker mugged a student of Indian origin. That was the news, sure. But you didn't follow the news. I'm afraid what you followed was the news machine."

"I don't understand the difference," I said.

Lava brought out a jug of orange juice from the mini-fridge under the table and poured me a glass. "What does this look like to you?" she asked.

"A rather odd detour in conversation," I said.

"Consider orange juice to be news," she said. "Now take a sip."

I obeyed and realised that the juice was not fresh but bottled.

"It looked like news, almost an exact imitation. But it was an orange-flavoured syrup made in a factory. And not until you buy it, pour it and touch it to your tongue, do you realise this is not the real thing," Lava said. "But now you can't return what's inside of you. You can only ensure you don't drink more of it."

"And how was I supposed to do that," I asked, settling into my chair.

"You remember our wrestling days?"

"I do," I said, reminded of the days of pure obsession. The fights, the tap-outs, the stories, the rivalries, the signature moves and the soundtracks to announce arrivals. And then how we imitated it all on a futon in my room, with capes that we fashioned out of towels.

"We were twigs following trees," I said.

"We were eight," she said. "And you remember Bal?"

“Bal?” I asked, unsure. But then it came to me. “The one involved in the infamous fight of 1995 …”

One of the great things of having the combined strength of a cheap bouquet was that if a fight turned serious, the only thing hurt were our egos. But during the last fight, the fight of 1995, Bal fell, no, flew off the bed and went nose-first into the wall. And then his nostrils began bleeding. So naturally, the other wrestlers started to cry. Adults rushed inside and carried away the wounded and the traumatised. And one of the adults turned to us just as he was leaving, and said, “It isn’t real, you know.”

At the time, I didn’t know what he was talking about. *What is not real?* I wondered. *The fights? The rivalries? The sport? Bal’s nose?*

But over the next few years, it became clear that the only real thing in all of it was Bal’s now crooked sniffer.

The rest was all *kayfabe*.

What is *kayfabe*?

Though there are many theories of the origin of the word, *kayfabe* means to present staged events as real.

The sport of professional wrestling which began as entertainment for local crowds, soon became like any other sport – big with the help from bookmakers. To draw in crowds, organisers gave wrestlers back-stories, so their fights would have meaning. So crowds could love and hate the wrestlers.

But before long, stories were not the only made-up part of wrestling. Organisers were inventing rivalries, exhibiting practiced moves and rigging results. And while the spectators watched the twists and turns in awe, only the industry insiders knew what was fake and what was real. And all of this rested on one simple word … *kayfabe*.

The rivalries, the arguments, the fights, the tap-out – all of it – *kayfabe*.

“The difference between a sport and a scripted setup,” said Lava. “And it’s not just limited to wrestling. Actors dating before their film release. Politicians sparking up rivalries right before elections. Television reality show contestants maintaining rivalries…”

“Kayfabe!” I said.

She nodded. “Expect a fight and end up watching synchronised choreography. Watch reality television and observe people playing characters. And in the same way, when you turn on the television expecting to hear the news, you are being fed a staged version of the truth.”

“Kayfabe!” I was starting to enjoy saying the word.

1. The hero news anchor

Ever wonder why you trust a news reader over another?

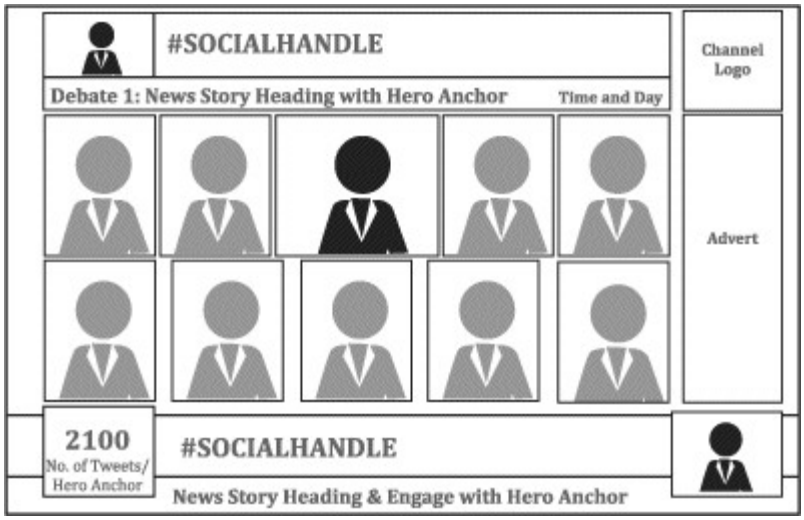
This is because a news channel promotes one anchor over everyone else. Around this “hero[3]” anchor they build a narrative. He or she, but mostly he, is everywhere. Marketing trailers prop up the hero’s integrity, honesty and courage. Billboards, blogs and behinds of buses make him or her a familiar figure. Not dissimilar to a wrestling icon.

“Millions are spent to convince viewers that this is a person who hunts for the truth,” Lava said. “Odd, since the biggest part of a news anchor’s job is to read from a teleprompter without stutters.”

“But why do news channels go to such lengths?” I asked. *Why do they spend millions to convince us to trust their hero? Why present a news anchor as saviour?*

“The news machine knows,” said Lava. “The value of a news anchor you can follow blindly. So, when this anchor tells you that the attacks in Melbourne are racially motivated, you believe it. You don’t require proof.”

With that, Lava turned my attention to a television monitor. A still from the news machine:



“I call this, the omnipresence of the hero anchor.” Lava said.

Not only is the hero anchor everywhere I look, he also appears thrice on a single screen. There are two on the corners. Marketing clips playing on loop, showing the anchor at the height of his or her rage. And then, there is the one in the middle.

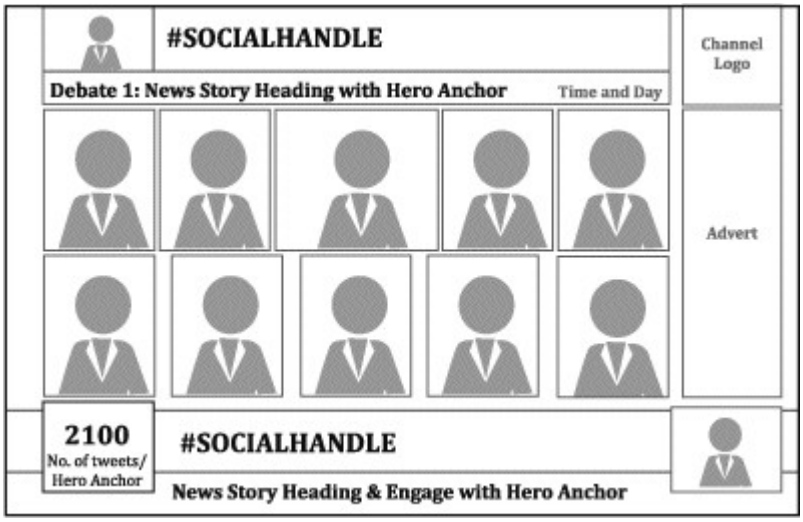
The hero anchor appears surrounded. Twelve experts – politicians, activists, preachers, people who are infamous – fire comments and remarks.

“You have watched enough trailers to know that the hero anchor won’t compromise. You believe that the ‘hero’ will stand up to them. That the hero will ask the right questions. On the topics that matter and to people who are accountable. The hero is alone and fighting. Surrounded by a dozen enemies.” she paused. “You’re not watching the news, darling. This is a Bollywood film.”

Kayfabe, said the voice inside my head.

2. The cheering crowds

Inside a wrestling arena, as wrestlers talk into a microphone, the crowd cheers and boos. Reactions inform organisers. What works, what needs work. But how do you gauge the reaction of an audience through a television set?



“Notice the doubling up of words,” Lava said. “Hero anchors can read. They’d like to know if you can.”

The provocative headlines, the accusatory tone, the over-dramatic responses are not without reason. The trap exists to draw out a viewer. Convert a viewer into a participant. To make me take to the streets with a jam sandwich.

Lava pointed to the numbers on the bottom left of the screen. “These numbers are the cheers and the boos of the crowd.”

“So when someone responds to a story on *Indians being attacked in Australia …*”

“They know what you would like to watch,” she said.

“Even if it’s not true?”

Lava goes back into her chair. “When it comes to the news, truth is a transferable commodity. Did you know during the year of those protests,

more students from China and south-east Asia were mugged and attacked in Australia. And more than them, Australian students were mugged and attacked."

"I knew none of that," I said.

"For the simple reason that for a news channel, isolated facts serve as the truth." she said. "Indian students were not over-represented in crimes. This was a world in recession and crime rates just went up."

I paused to reflect on all the things I did after a bottle of the news.

"A news anchor's anger is no different than the loud moans of a prostitute. Let it out, so I can be done with you, is what they really want to say. That anger, is…"

"*Kayfabe* … " I add, with dulled enthusiasm.

3. Keeping it loud and terribly uncomfortable

The good news is, the chaos is by design. News channels would desperately like you to know that they were the first to report. They don't want you to concentrate too much on what they report.

"They don't want you to see that they have compromised on integrity and due diligence."

"I don't understand why though," I said.

"They don't want you to see who they are …" she said.

Who are they? I pondered, as I walked along the circumference of my apartment. *Is this 'they' the same they that I encountered earlier? Are them that they?* The question puzzled me. *Who are 'they'?* I appeared to keep coming back to the same question, quite like the radiator pole that kept hitting me in the crotch as I circled through the apartment.

So I began to look. And each time I came across the radiator pole, I hurdled over it. Not only was it good exercise, but it dawned on me that this might be the key to sidestepping the giant trap that the news machine set out for me.

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The news machine no longer dictates my actions. I have seen the filth that it brings to my life. I have understood what they are trying to hide. Also, the cable bill is unpaid.

Since we are living in a world where film writers copy and news writers use their imagination, I am quite comfortable not being the first one to get the news. For news to reach me, it must first pass through other people. People who are willing to spread the news they consume, and enthusiastic enough to get past my contempt for it. This helps me gauge people for what they spread, and how far apart I must stand during the conversation. And a strict diet of secondhand news keeps me from joining protests or inciting riots.

But it also helps me avoid what I had been missing. Like the raindrop that hits an eyelid and reveals a dark sky, a simple look at who they are makes me wary of the machine.

Ever wonder why newsreaders discredit voices rather than debate issues? Well, of the over 400 news channels in our country, most are either owned by politicians, their families, their donors or they have a political power broker on their board. One of these donors has interests in over 30 news channels. And without proper ownership rules, we might soon get all the news from a single company. So it turns out, *they* are about as free as we were under the British.

This might be why news channels, which should observe and report, now manufacture and propagate. And why glorified advertisements are making hero anchors into newsmakers. And eventually, propagandists.

You might expect that a medium that can influence millions of people might put more thought into what they say. Why don’t they? Perhaps because the consequences don’t affect them. They escalated racial tensions between the two countries, but they weren’t adversely affected. If anything, they profited off the crisis. They were only concerned about who brings the news first.

And in their obsession of breaking news, they broke the news.

[3] *Hero is used as a gender-neutral term. Hold off on the riot.*

2047 will be a big year for us.
It will be a hundred years of being ripped off by our own.

NINE

A brief history of how India came to be ruled by

A PUBLIC LISTED COMPANY

I assume, when the British got to India, they struggled to pronounce names of our cities and towns. Perhaps, a British officer wanted to go to *Venkatanarasimharajuvaripeta* and thought to himself – no way I can pronounce this. And so, he did what most of us do at an Asian restaurant – point and say we want that. *Number 13, please*.

And it is possible, that for that reason alone, they called *Visakhapatnam Vizag*; *Thiruvananthapuram Trivandrum*; *Udhagamandalam Ooty*.

But the names the British kept bug us to this day. Over a hundred dynasties ruled us. Never mind the names the other dynasties that ruled this region kept for us, never mind the Pandya, Nanda, Chola, Chera, Maurya, Shunga, Kushan, Gupta, Chalukya, Pala, Mughal, Portuguese, French, Dutch. No, British names bug us the most.

We appear to hate the British rule the most, mainly because they had bad manners. They said they were here to do business, and then they just stayed. Like the friend who takes your couch for a night, and then you notice his toothbrush on the coffee table. They traded spices and stole the Kohinoor. And we hate their legacy. We use a part of their constitution, their sewage network and their metric system. We participate in the Commonwealth games and we cheer for them in the football world cups, but that is where we draw the line. We cannot stand that they named our states and cities and towns and streets and structures. And so, since the British have left, we have gone nuts changing names.

So much, that with a majority of our population malnourished, we prioritise changing names than spend on food.

Since the British left, we have changed over 70,000 names. That is two a day for the last 70 odd years. Like a doctor’s prescription, these renaming

ceremonies. Millions of rupees on airbrushing history. But in all this, in wiping the white off our walls, we have forgotten even the lessons that their rule taught us.

We appear to forget that we are one of the only countries in the world to be ruled directly by a public listed company.

So, let us take a quick refresher and see what we remember:

Introduction:

How India came to be ruled directly by a public listed company.

Let’s go back in history …

What is the British East India Company (BEIC)?

At its peak, the BEIC was the world's first public listed company with a private army of over 300,000 soldiers. At its weirdest, it was one of the world's first truly multinational conglomerates to rule a country. But what a lot of us seem to forget is that at its beginning, the British East India Company was just an innocent start-up.

Part 1 of 5 – The BEIC start-up business plan

Problem	In England during the 1600s, the price of spices fluctuates wildly.
Reasons	1) Spice voyages are largely disorganised. Arrival of multiple spice ships around the same time causes prices to plummet. And if none arrive for a while, prices shoot up. 2) Sponsoring individual voyages is a high-risk investment.
Opportunity	The Asian spice market promises high returns. A successful voyage can give returns up to 500 times. If a single company controls the number of ship arrivals, they can also control commodity values.
Competitive advantage	(After a fat bribe) The crown has agreed to hand the BEIC a 20-year exclusive licence to trade in Asia. No other British ships can turn left.
Team	The company boasts of three functional ships, a group of experienced merchants and a leased

office space.

Part 2 of 5 – How to go from a start-up to a spice commerce giant

The BEIC IPO (initial public offer) launches at £ 100 (about £ 30,000 in 2019) and they set out to explore the booming spice market. They might be the only British company in the Asian seas, but the region is flooded with spice players. There are the Portuguese, who have the first movers' advantage. The French traders, who are fighting for a spot in India. And then, a giant by the name of the Dutch East India Company. But above all, the BEIC knows how to navigate the competitive environment. It exhibits spectacular tact and fat bribes.

Breakthrough moment

The ruler of Bengal grants BEIC the world's first 100% FDI (foreign direct investment), and the world's first *exclusive* duty-free waiver on all trade in Bengal. This allows BEIC to rise from just another start-up to a spice commerce giant.

Part 3 of 5 – Investors reward bad behaviour:

FDI is a good start, sure. But not merely enough for investors in England. Back home, the BEIC shares are sagging. They came for spices, but they saw an opportunity in opium. And now, they would like to grow and export more opium (their highest selling product). But they need more land, and like all companies, they prefer not to pay taxes. So, they try it.

This angers the ruler of Bengal. And to punish the BEIC's unethical moves, he slaps them with an injunction. BEIC officials are brought to the king's court. They lie down on the ground. Apologise. Pay a huge fine. There is some jail time. And off they go. For the BEIC, Bengal has dropped on the *business friendly* list.

And for the *development* and *growth of the region*, they hold a meeting. A brainstorming session. The outcome: We need a more *business friendly* ruler. A puppet.

But there is a slight problem. The ruler of Bengal has an army of 65,000. He has infantry, cavalry, archers, guns and home ground advantage. The BEIC has 750 soldiers.

It doesn't bother the BEIC. They go to battle anyway. When the two armies line up against each other, 65,000 against 750, it appears that to win the battle, each BEIC soldier must kill at least 86.66 Mughal soldiers. But what seems like a suicide mission will soon be the turning point of their stay in India.

As the Nawab raises his sword and rides with his army towards the gang of fair-skinned men, what he does not know is that the BEIC has paid off his commander-in-chief. And 30,000 of his soldiers suddenly turn against their own army. Caught off-guard, the army implodes. From a distance, the BEIC Colonel watches a hand slap its own face. The death toll of the victorious BEIC is 10 British soldiers.

Bottom line, it wins. A public listed company now *owns* a large part of Bengal, which comes with the right to collect taxes. Brilliant! Back in London, the company shares jump from £ 39 to £ 260. BEIC is the talk of the town. A company that can collect tax – heirs to early investors are excited. In 2019, this is the equivalent of £ 55,120 per share.

The Battle of Plassey killed and wounded 500 people – *but would you look at my portfolio!*

Part 4 of 5 – Investors will allow genocide if it increases their share price

The great Bengal famine of 1769 claims 10 million lives. Causes: Droughts, battles, the most fertile land being used for opium cultivation and no support from the company for farmers. But, during one of the worst famines in the world, the BEIC manages to double its profits. How?

I imagine an urgent crisis boardroom meeting. From the Company's perspective, these deaths are terrible news. For one thing, they have now lost a third of their tax paying citizens. And to prevent their share price from tumbling, they release a statement to the press:

To Whom It May Concern

In view of the terrible famine, the company is providing a 100 per cent tax relief to the deceased.

P.S. – Instead BEIC is taking over their land.

BEIC's solutions to maintain profits:

1. Collect taxes even if it means farmers starve to death. Use of force is justified if it quickens the process.

2. Since there are fewer of us, the BEIC is increasing this year's tax by 15 per cent to maintain profits.

3. Food is scarce. Farmers are dead. Farms belong to the BEIC. So, the BEIC will grow more opium.

And there, you have it. Profits go up from £ 15 million to £ 30 million. In 2019 – this is equivalent to £ 7.85 billion. To sum up, in one of the worst famines in the history of the world, the British East India Company doubles its profits, smuggles opium to China, increases taxes, uses violence to collect those taxes, wages wars and its share price rises. I wonder, does it reflect on the character of the BEIC or its investors …?

Part 5 of 5 – Public listed companies would love to run a country as a factory

1. Crown puppet rulers.

2. Squeeze local traders and sell their products for glorious profits overseas.

3. If farmers die, annex their land.

4. Outsource soldier recruitments to, well, India.

By 1857, the company which began as a start-up in a docking yard, is now the world's most valuable enterprise. Their strength can be measured by the fact that the BEIC could have floated the cricket league teams from each state and fixed matches without consequences.

They have ‘friends’ in the British parliament to flush out laws and bills at will. And soon, their business description reads like an A to Z of products.

Arms, **B**eads, **C**ardamom, **D**efence, **E**ducation, **F**ennel, **G**arlic, **H**umantrafficking, **I**nsidertrading, **J**ewels, **K**ohinoor, **L**aw, **M**ilitary, **N**avy, **O**pium, **P**ashmina, **Q**uilting, **R**ed chilli, **S**hips, **T**obacco, **U**nions, **V**enture capital, **W**holesale, **X**xx, **Y**arn, **Z**inc ... and we are out of alphabet letters …

Conclusion: Hidden in plain sight

Our school history textbooks will have you believe that the great Indian Mutiny was solely responsible for the fall of the BEIC. For this, misplaced nationalism, censorship and bias is responsible.

But, think about this – during its business life, the BEIC killed millions of people and fought wars that lasted for years. Then, could an uprising which took hardly 18 months to curb, be enough to force the Crown to strip the company of all its assets and functions?

It doesn’t sound right, does it? Especially, if you consider that after taking the reigns of the company the Crown did no different. It fought opium wars and treated Indian citizens unfairly.

The answer lay not in the Indian sub-continent, but in Britain.

Though the BEIC was the most valuable organisation in the world, their *influential* investors saw it as a giant waiting to fall. A debt-ridden company spread out too thin to effectively govern its business. Valuable, but in debt. Powerful, but not effective.

On five occasions, the British parliament had *bailed-out* the BEIC. And each time, it had taken steps to secure its investors. And by 1833, 24 years before the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the Crown had unofficially taken over the BEIC. The company that placed puppet governments throughout India was now itself a puppet. And when the mutiny occurred, the politicians used it as an excuse, and it took just a signature to dismantle the enormous enterprise.

The British government re-introduced the business to the Indian population as *the Crown*. Rebranded, and with a new logo, they ruled India

for another 90 years. I believe this to be the world's most brilliant public relations move in history.

Our history books tell us the mutiny ran the BEIC into the ground. But I imagine, even without the mutiny, the company would eventually have been dissolved anyway[4].

The fine print

You must wonder what made the BEIC such a ruthless company. Why it did the things it did? Well, the answer lies in the BEIC's origin. In a small clause found in the BEIC's exclusive rights contract. And it read something like this:

"The exclusive licence is granted with the provision that if the company fails to turn a profit for 3 years in a row, their licence will be cancelled."

A profit guarantee demand made the BEIC experiment a raging success and ultimately a human disaster. It is what a public listed company is – a monster driven by profits.

So, what is the big lesson here?

Must a government protect its people or the interest of money hungry corporations?

But is the lesson any good?

Is the country today any different from the 18th century?

Don't we see a nexus between corrupt politicians and greedy companies?

Don't bids for exclusive licences of the modern-day waves of telecommunication go to the highest political donor?

Are unethical companies snapping up defence contracts?

Are farming lands being handed to large corporations after the death of farmers?

And how are oil giants hiring ex-army men to 'guard' their 'facilities' and 'control' islands?

Boy! Am I out of 'air quotes'.

What good is a lesson then, if we don’t question why some companies are rising beyond their competition through unfair advantages? Can we take another two centuries of a public listed company rule?

Dismiss it as flaws of the past or the British ways. But remember, first it was the Portuguese, then came the Dutch, the French and then the British. Here the nationality is just a distraction.

The next one might just be the Indian East India Company, if you are looking for a *reliable* investment.

4 Just my opinion. Don't go burning things just yet.

You can’t believe everything you hear.

I hear all the time that a person is kicking himself.

I have never seen it happen.

TEN

A citizen’s manual

HOW TO DEFUSE AN IDIOT

As I drive past billboards, flip through channels, scramble through content, skim through magazines, and sit through films, I find us to be a country plastered with teachable moments. Each commercial is a sermon. Each advertisement we watch is hammering down a value. Each film carries this frisbee-sized morality pill it stuffs down our throat, lubricated by painfully slow voiceovers. It appears, our minds might be gutters of a twisted value system. Someone please tell me why a foreign-funded start-up provokes the value of nationalism, and why a bank launches a new loan scheme selling respect for senior citizens when the scheme’s cut off age is 60.

But, we have become a gallery of teachable moments. A giant swinging finger before our eyes, no matter where we look. There is always a lesson in progress. And yet, of most things in life, I remain an idiot. Why? Well, for one thing, I doubt humans can truly learn anything significant. Sure, we can learn to drive a car, or build a bridge, or work a tool, the smaller things we can. But what about the bigger lessons in life? We appear hopeless at working out those. Why else would history repeat?

So, this book is not meant to teach you anything. If you have learnt anything, it is purely accidental. And possibly delusional. At best, this book might make you aware. Help you see things clearer, like a pair of spectacles.

“But, *ass-hat*!” you say. “I thought you were going to tell me how to avoid a nation of idiots.”

“Patience,” I respond.

Now, assuming you read this book and not just skimmed through the pages, you now have the tools to identify an idiot. You can watch the news

and spot its *kayfabe*. You can see politicians clapping with the sticky palms of religion. You have met the *Allers*, who stand together clueless. And you have met Amrita, who holds the invaluable *No-No List*. Now, you can tell the difference between the citizen and the idiot. But identifying an idiot is one thing. Avoiding a nation of idiots is quite another.

A CITIZEN'S MANUAL – HOW TO DEFUSE AN IDIOT

CAUTION: Care must be taken while defusing. For, if handled incorrectly, an idiot tends to explode.

Step 1: Identify the kind of idiot.

You have identified an idiot. Well done! Now, slowly lift its hood and identify the kind. Common wiring models suggest that there are four kinds:

a. *The religious idiot:*

The religious idiot in us makes us believe only one of the unbelievable and unfathomable stories is true. Blind to the obvious, we limit our choices.

Example: Exhibiting blind devotion to a godman. Generally, a religious idiot believes that this person is somehow superior than the others. But also, that believers of 'other things' are lesser beings. Sadly, none of these statements are true.

b. The gullible idiot:

The gullible idiot in us makes us sway towards the louder lot – mostly towards those in the public eye. And while there is hope here, this makes us vulnerable, like a boat riding waves. This will take us towards reason or idiocy, whichever way the wind blows.

Example: Taking commercial news as the sole source of knowledge and opinion. And a newsreader's words as the ultimate truth.

c. The good idiot:

The good idiot is the most common of all. It makes us go along. Ignorance is the only flaw. A good, fine person unknowingly stumbles into idiocy.

Example: Confusing law and religion, that a woman ‘must’ take her husband’s last name.

d. The arrogant idiot:

The arrogant idiot in us is loud and blunt. This is also the ultimate currency of *idiotsville*. And, a near unredeemable kind.

Example: Taking to the streets when a political party calls a curfew. Often, it makes us angry without a cause.

Step 2: Defusing the idiot (exception: the arrogant idiot).

First, don’t make the mistake of thinking that everyone around you is an idiot. They are all around us, no doubt, but they are fewer in number than you might assume. They are loud and vocal, like news anchors. And this creates an illusion that they are everywhere you look. But, for every idiot out there, there are a hundred citizens. Except, this means we are a billion people, surrounded by millions of idiots.

Idiocy is reluctant to listen to logic or reason. This makes them difficult to deal with and a pain to tolerate. Their interest lies in propagating their views and opinions, and what they consider to be logic and reason. Let me put it like this: while an idiot is unwilling to listen to reason from others, they would like others to listen to *their* reasons and *their* logic.

So, the way to defuse an idiot is to give them a question to answer. A simple, obvious question.

While some respond to the questions, others respond to their own answers. It might not evict them from the nation of idiots or even nudge them towards the border, but if you question, it does two distinct things. One: it makes you sure of where you stand. And two: the one on the other side will know what they said.

To defuse an idiot, give them a question to answer and let them hear it out aloud in their own voice.

Step 2a: Defusing the arrogant idiot.

While defusing an arrogant idiot is the hardest job of all, it is wildly satisfying. Here is an example of how to effectively disarm an arrogant

idiot.

I have a habit of working from cafés and restaurants. This comes from the need to be among people, but not with them. And one afternoon, while I was with my cup of coffee and my journal, four couples walked into the café for their Sunday brunch. The kind who pay for a meal but also buy the air around them.

Now, I am not one to eavesdrop unless words are loud enough for me to hear. Also, I don't consider it rude. For one thing, tables in cafés are close enough to ensure we are all part of one giant conversation. Sometimes, when my wife and I are at a café and we hear a more interesting conversation close by, we stop talking and listen in. And for another, if we could control what we hear, ears would have lids. So, it is natural, just like the burp and the fart, which was not meant for me, I see no harm in allowing the rest of the stuff inside.

Anyway, from their conversation, I gathered that three of the couples had been married for a few years, and one of them had recently returned from their honeymoon and was settling into married life. They spoke like titans and feasted like falcons. Until the bill arrived. And then, their math skills came to life. They pointed out the ones who ordered drinks, picked off the vegetarians and singled out the lady with a peanut allergy. To close off, one of them pointed out that the service had been sub-par. And then, something happened that made me rock back in awe.

The loudest among a competitive bunch was the recently married man, who pulled the bill toward him, announcing he would pay and the others could settle it later. But, as he did so, his wife pulled out her wallet and offered to pay the bill.

"Why would you pay?" her husband said, with a smile.

"Can't I pay?" she said.

"I got this," he looked at his friends, smirking. "Why would you pay?"

"I don't understand. You can take money from my parents, but you can't let me pay for a lunch?" she said.

There was silence. I imagined my mouth was open so wide that you could see what I was chewing. I had just seen an arrogant idiot defused.

And with such ease that it threw me off. *How did she do it?* I wondered.

And it got me thinking. The only reason an arrogant idiot is so brazen and unwilling to change is because they believe they have gotten away with it. Well, there is the answer, isn't it? Don't let them get away with it. A question will catch them in the act, the obvious shames them, and shame defuses the arrogant idiot.

Step 2b: Defusing the out-of-reach idiot.

The menace of the nation of idiots lies in its ability to build up member count at a maddening rate. When the right situation arises (think demonetisation), the nation of idiots can recruit a million members a minute. And it catches us by surprise. Sometimes, it drags us in with it. And for every opportunity we get to progress, it pulls us back, it draws us in, and it draws us down.

And you can question the idiots before you, but how do we defuse the idiots that stand on stages and shout into microphones? The idiots that sell us fairness creams? And the idiots that report the news in screams and soundtracks?

We can't speak to them, we can't ask them a question, so we think we cannot defuse those idiots. But then, why do we contribute to their popularity, their business, their 'net-worth'? Why hand them the power? Why vote for the idiot? Why watch the fabricated news? Why watch the film of an idiot promoting fairness creams? When, to defuse them, we can just shut them out.

For an out-of-reach idiot, shut them out, and they will listen.

***

I find us an interesting bunch. We are intolerant of the debate of intolerance but tolerant to religious intolerance. We cling onto age-old chauvinism, but a holiday can alter our accent. We won't stop at a zebra crossing, but we will damn well stop on it. We build things to prove our worth and break things to prove a point. To us, caste and community is a badge of trust, religion is a line of control and a godman is an anti-depressant. We love the concept of independence, but we need our parents

to help raise our kids. Our constitution comes from the British, the Soviets, the Irish, and our films from the Americans. We ask for space when we need time, and time when we want to find a way to say “No.” We scripted the Kamasutra, but our films play out like nursery rhymes.

So, who are we?

A collection of neighbourhoods and communities?

Perhaps.

Problem being, communities tend to shield idiots only because they belong. Like lawyers with low morals, communities allow idiots to be, well, idiots. “He might be an idiot, but he is still one of ours. Our own!” they say. And then they vote for them. Communities also tend to cause tensions based around idiots. “You don’t touch our idiot and we don’t touch yours.”

So, what does that make us?

A collection of neighbourhoods allowing evil?

Why else would certain communities allow such idiocy?

- Communities where marriage brokers sell male heirs to the highest dowry bidder.

- Communities where a bride is showcased with the jewellery which her family has ‘given’, for an entire colony of friends and relatives to evaluate.

- Communities where people announce the price of gifts from relatives to an audience of guests.

- Communities which rename brides after marriage, as though their past must not get in the way of their married life.

And so, I ask again – who are we?

Are we a people comfortable with idiocy, when packaged as a norm?

Is this why we marry within our communities? So no one questions when we lay out our demands? So no one challenges us? No one says, “Buy your own *bloody* fridge!” We know someone who did this before, so how could it be wrong? We can point to an example of idiocy as proof enough to abide by the rules of stupidity. And it suits most of us, so we shield this idiocy.

Consider this: Our solution to get past the evil customs of communities is to not question it, but to attempt for a male heir for as long as it takes. So we too can enjoy the benefits? Why else do we do all this? These brackets of communities help us get away with it – where we build, where we marry, where we trade, whom we trust, whom we hate and whose pain we feel. It appears like we spend our lives preparing for some sort of a riot.

If we are the ones shielding idiocy, what does that make us, I wonder.

My life has not been without its adventures of idiocy, I can assure you. Situations arise and I discover my ignorance. I accepted covers during weddings before I began questioning it. I went along with the ridiculous instructions of culture and habit until I asked the questions that others could not answer convincingly. My first vote went to the party for whom my family voted. My complaints outweighed my understanding of things.

Soon, where I was sleepwalking like an idiot, I was stepping out a citizen. And above all, two things had changed. Awareness of the smaller things with the bigger consequences. And courage to accept the idiot cap. I am an idiot – how do I change?

Look at actions and examine their impact:

- Accepting covers from a bride’s family to what it does to female birth rates.

- Fairness creams to how it drives women to a place of desperation.

- Voting on religion to how it empowers politicians to orchestrate riots.

- Following godmen blindly to money laundering frauds.

- Engaging with news channels to having lives destroyed for a scoop.

Religion, voting, dowry, traditions, culture, news, politics – through one experience at a time, I began to defuse the idiot in me. Even now, I consider myself a recovering idiot. And while I began writing this book with the intention of changing ‘mindsets’, it is a journey about which I have written. The journey from being an idiot to becoming a citizen.

***

I close with a thought:

While it might seem like a tall task, the journey is not difficult. It is not the same as shedding weight. It is not gradual. It is not painful. On the contrary, that first question you ask will transform you into a citizen. Think of it like this, the idiot sleeps in bed with a full bladder, unwilling to relieve himself. He can’t sleep, but he does not want to get up. The effort seems tremendous. The mere thought is exhausting, of standing up and walking five paces to the bathroom. But once you do it, you realise it is not difficult. In the end, you will have a smile of relief. And you will sleep, peacefully.

The journey from an idiot to a citizen is a short one, but you must be willing to make it.

Touch only those who are willing.

Acknowledgements

A book is not an award. A book is like a sweater you knit. You take so long and then you are finally done. But is it any good? Does it fit? Has it got any style? Does only your mother like it? At the time of writing this page, these questions remain unanswered.

So to thank people for a book through an acknowledgements page only because you managed to complete it seems a tad self-indulgent. But how else do you thank someone? Do you get them a gift basket? Where do I get one of those? How about I gift *money* instead? But for that, I'd have to buy envelopes and dress them up as *covers*. Money – naked – is essentially a tip. So maybe I should look them in the eyes and express my gratitude. I should tell them that working with them I felt like a pilot falling through a rainforest. They were the branches that broke my fall. Sure, it hurt at times and I broke some bones. But in the end, I did not die because of them. And for this reason, this sweater is theirs as much as it is mine. So I suppose, I should express my gratitude in person. Visit each one …

Following are the people who helped me knit this sweater:

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and ultimately, my grandparents and my parents

(the ones who knit the man who knit this sweater)

Thank you.

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